



322: SHOUTING ACROSS THE DIVIDE TRANSCRIPT

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Prologue.

Ira Glass You probably remember when those Danish cartoons of the prophet Mohammed caused so much anger in the Muslim world. Violent protests over Europe and the Middle East, flags were burned, Danish products pulled off shelves. It's blasphemy to depict the prophet at all. Many American newspapers would not reprint the Danish cartoons. And is this true for you? I am not actually sure I've ever seen any kind of picture of the prophet Mohammed, ever.

Well with that in mind, it's kind of interesting to hear that there is a place in this country where you can see an image of Mohammed right now. There's actually a sculpture of Mohammed on display in Washington, DC. And not in some crackpot salon. This is actually in a US government building. And it's not just any US government building. It's the Supreme Court building. And it's not just any room in the Supreme Court building. It's actually in the room where the justices hear cases. You're a US Supreme Court Justice, you look up and to the right from the bench, and there's Mohammed.

And hearing this, perhaps right now you're asking yourself the exact same question that Ibrahim Hooper had when he first heard about this.

Ibrahim Hooper Why would they have an image of the prophet Mohammed in the Supreme Court?

Ira Glass Unlike you, however, it is Ibrahim Hooper's job to get to the bottom of this kind of thing. Hooper, I should tell you, seems like an unusually cheerful man to have the job that he has. Every single day he goes off to work in an office with the not so simple mission of explaining the Muslim perspective to non-Muslims.

Ibrahim Hooper I'm spokesman or communications director for the Council on American-Islamic Relations.

Ira Glass And it was in this job that back in 1996, he first heard about this sculpture. And he looked into it.

Ibrahim Hooper What you see when you go in to the Supreme Court is there's a series of sculptures around the top of the main room. And one of them is of the prophet Mohammed. And he is shown with a sword in one hand and a Koran in the other.

Ira Glass He's actually one of 18 figures, all of them lawgivers throughout the ages including Moses and Solomon, Hammurabi the King of Babylon, King John of England whose seal is actually on the Magna Carta, Augustus Caesar who was the first emperor of Rome. You have Charlemagne, Confucius, Napoleon, basically all of them lined up in a row like it's a small, small world at Disneyland but for lawyers, OK?

Ibrahim Hooper And they tell us it was designed to pay tribute to these people, including the prophet Mohammed. And we don't disagree with that.

Ira Glass Now it's my understanding this has been there since the '30s.

Ibrahim Hooper Yeah, and we almost hated to bring it up to them of this. If they really think it's there to honor them, it's like well what else are these guys going to complain about?

Ira Glass Ibrahim says that the problem from a Muslim perspective was not just that they depicted the prophet Mohammed in this sculpture.

Ibrahim Hooper But in this case in particular, you've got a somewhat stereotypical representation in that it has the sword and the Koran, which is often-- people make the stereotype of Islam was spread with camel riding Muslims going across the desert with a sword in one hand and the Koran in the other. So that in itself, along with the visual representation of the prophet, is a problem for Muslims.

Ira Glass So, on behalf of his organization and American Muslims, Ibrahim wrote a letter to the Supreme Court. And he met with the Supreme Court staff in what he says was a very amicable meeting. And before long, he got an answer about the sculpture and a letter from then Chief Justice Rehnquist.

Ibrahim Hooper They came back saying basically that because it was designed to honor the prophet, that it would not be changed. But that the literature describing-- it's called the North Wall Frieze-- would be changed to reflect some of the criticism.

Ira Glass "Altering the stone carving," the Chief Justice wrote, would quote "impair the artistic integrity of the whole." And as to the fact that Mohammed was shown with a sword, Rehnquist said, quote, "I would point out that swords are used throughout the Court's architecture as a symbol of justice. Nearly a dozen swords appear in the courtroom friezes alone." And so, with that, the statue stays.

But the official Supreme Court information sheet about it says, quote, "The figure above is a well-intentioned attempt by the sculptor to honor Mohammed and it bears no resemblance to Mohammed." And then it says, "Muslims generally have a strong aversion to sculptured or pictured

representations of their prophet." That is, we know you are offended, and we acknowledge that. Now sit down.

Ibrahim Hooper A bit disappointing, but at least we did what we needed to do.

Ira Glass I have to say, the moral of the story is sort of dispiriting. It's one of these moments where people are trying to be inclusive. And even then, they screw it up.

Ibrahim Hooper Yeah, and it's kind of a situation where people aren't quite understanding each other's perspective. We would hope that people would understand why we would raise objections about this portrayal. But I have the feeling that people on the other side are scratching their heads and going, you can't please them. We thought we were doing a good thing by putting in an image of the prophet Mohammed and still they don't like it.

Ira Glass And how typical is this kind of thing?

Ibrahim Hooper Well it seems to be getting worse as we go along. We had the recent situation where we had the imams praying in an airport in Minnesota. And that seemed to freak people out. And then they were taken off the plane. And from our perspective, who could object to somebody praying? But from other people's perspectives, they say, well they prayed before they crashed the planes into the World Trade Centers.

Ira Glass Which brings us to today's program, stories of Muslims and non-Muslims shouting across a divide, trying to communicate with each other and not always getting their point across. From WBEZ Chicago, it's *This American Life*, distributed by Public Radio International. I'm Ira Glass. Act One of today's show, forget about the problems of presidents and diplomats have being understood by each other. Why would it be so hard for Muslims and non-Muslims to get along in the fourth grade.

Act Two, America the Ad Campaign. In that act, Shalom Auslander explains the difficulties of selling brand America to the Arab world, which he experienced in his job at a big ad agency. Stay with us.

Act One. Which One Of These Is Not Like The Others?

Ira Glass Act One, Which One of These is Not Like the Others? This is partly a story about Muslims and non-Muslims not seeing eye to eye. But it's also about how that kind of dispute can affect a family. And effect it in a really big way, a surprisingly large way. Alix Spiegel tells what happened.

Alix Spiegel This sad story begins with a happy one, a love story set in a location not usually associated with love stories, the West Bank. It was there that Serry met her husband, a man with a wonderful sense of humor who, like Serry, felt strongly about his Islamic faith. Now because they were observant Muslims, the couple didn't date in the traditional American way. Instead, they met exclusively in the presence of family, talked, exchange philosophies. Serry was, is, an American, born and bred. But these restrictions didn't bother her, didn't faze her at all.

Serry I pretty much knew this was the person I wanted to have children with. I knew he was a really decent, to the core kind of guy. And it really didn't take long for us to realize, we were pretty much soul mates.

Alix Spiegel So there really was no question that they would get married. No question that they would spend the rest of their lives together. The only real question was where to raise their family. On this point, Serry felt pretty strongly. When they were getting to know each other, her husband had shared horror stories about his childhood in the West Bank, stories of situations that Serry, who grew up in a large American city without being exposed to strife of any kind, had no interest in experiencing firsthand.

Serry So I convinced him to come to America. And I said it would be a perfect place to raise our children because they would never have to go through some of the things he went through as a child. Anyway, he was very hopeful. He came to this country on a very hopeful note. And we were really happy. We were really happy, very blessed.

Alix Spiegel The couple started out in New York City, but after having three children, decided that they wanted a more suburban existence, a quiet place where their kids could play outside. Now let me clarify something about Serry and her husband. Though they were personally devout Muslims, they were all about assimilation. In fact, growing up, Serry had almost no Muslim friends. So when it came time to move, they didn't worry much about finding a community where there were people who shared their faith. Instead, they picked a small, prosperous town on the East Coast.

Serry There was no mosque around. The nearest mosque was actually about an hour from where we lived. We went there maybe sporadically. But it was never really an issue because we always thought we were free to practice our religion anywhere we were. And honestly, to me, I think it's very boring if I were just surrounded by Muslims. So I was actually looking forward to raising my children where we landed.

Alix Spiegel The family spent four happy years in their new home, had two more children, a successful local business. And then came September 11. Like everyone else, Serry and her husband watched in horror as the towers came down, worried about their friends and family. And then, like most people, went back to their day to day lives. But suddenly, Serry says, her neighbors in her small town seemed to see her in a different way. They didn't return her greetings and stared at her hijab, the headscarf she wore out of respect for God.

Serry I saw it in people. I saw something that wasn't there before. And it was-- sometimes I would drive, and drivers in the next lane would give me the finger.

Alix Spiegel Serry says she usually flashed the peace sign back, then drove away. But every time this happened, it absolutely floored her. It just didn't conform to her idea of herself.

Alix Spiegel You mostly saw yourself as American, right?

Serry Yes, absolutely. I mean that was my primary identifier.

Alix Spiegel Then almost a year after September 11, Serry got a very clear signal that at least one of her neighbors didn't see her as American as she saw herself.

Serry I got up in the morning and piled the kids into my minivan only to find out that our minivan had been vandalized. Our windshield was broken, and there was a note that was left on the broken windshield saying-- essentially ordered us to leave the country.

Alix Spiegel Serry immediately hid the note in her purse, and tried to minimize the whole thing for the kids.

Serry I told them things would be OK. And I told them not to really talk about it to anyone.

Alix Spiegel Why did you tell them not to tell anybody or talk about it?

Serry Well, I didn't want them bringing attention to themselves that way. As a mother, I just didn't want people to perceive us as victims, as people that this is done to. I was hoping it was just an isolated incident. And so that's what I told the kids. It was probably some maybe adolescent who had a bad day. So we chalked it up to that.

Alix Spiegel Serry's husband, however, had a different view. Perhaps because of his background, perhaps for some other reason, he found the incident profoundly unsettling. But, like Serry, he minimized the situation in front of the kids.

Serry He never showed the children that he was upset really. He just told them, these things happen from time to time. Vandalisms happen unfortunately.

Alix Spiegel And so the family continued as it had. In private, Serry and her husband prayed five times a day. But in the outside world, aside from the hijab Serry wore, they downplayed their faith, rarely talked about it. This was also true of their children.

Chloe I really didn't have any Muslim friends.

Alix Spiegel Really?

Chloe No.

Alix Spiegel This is Serry's twelve year old daughter, her eldest. I'll call her Chloe. Chloe, like her mother, is shockingly beautiful. So it's no surprise to hear that even though she had no Muslim friends, for most of her life Chloe was extremely popular. That's what her mother says, and Chloe agrees.

Chloe I had a lot of friends. We were into horses basically. And we went over to each other's houses just to play with them, talk about them, and draw them.

Alix Spiegel Because Chloe spent most of her life in the same town, growing up with the same kids, September 11 didn't really affect her relationships. Her friends knew she was Muslim, but clearly didn't care. They still went to each other's houses and played with their toy horses. At least that's how it was for about a year after the towers came down.

Then, Chloe turned nine and entered the fourth grade. Chloe, who had always done well academically, was looking forward to going back to class. She thought it would be a normal school year. And in fact, when Chloe showed up in her classroom at the end of the summer, close to the year anniversary of September 11, things did seem pretty normal.

Chloe I got to meet my teacher, and she seemed nice the first day, the first week. But it all changed on September 11, that one day.

Serry I picked up the children from school that day, and she was in tears. She was inconsolable. She wasn't even making sense. She just was crying and crying.

Alix Spiegel Apparently, as part of the lesson for the 9/11 anniversary, the teacher in Chloe's class had passed out a book, a slim paperback intended to educate the students about the 9/11 tragedy.

Serry On the cover it was a picture of The World Trade Center in flames.

Chloe And the first thing was, September 11 was a horrible day. Thousands and thousands died. And it said, "Who did it? We don't know, but here's a clue."

Serry Muslims hate Christians. Muslims hate Americans. Muslims believe that anyone who doesn't practice Islam is evil, and that the Koran teaches war and hate.

Chloe There were three other people sitting at my table. And we were all just looking at the book. And I was glancing at their faces while we were reading it. And some of them-- their eyes started to widen, and they just kind of looked at me every time she said the word Muslim. There were some pictures of Muslim ladies wearing the headscarf, hijab. And some of them said, "Hey, those weird ladies. Her mom is one of them." And then they just all looked at me and said, "You're one of those bad Muslims, aren't you?" And I just said, no, no I'm not.

Alix Spiegel Naturally, after hearing about her daughter's day, Serry called the principal, who was sympathetic but explained to Serry that there just wasn't much she could do.

Serry It turns out that this was actually a district-wide lesson, meaning that there was a book presented to all the fourth grades in the district.

Alix Spiegel Now you might remember that in America following 9/11, there was an immediate press to construct some narrative about what had happened, a need for an explanation of why and what for. And so, all over the country in hundreds of school districts, educators set to work trying to pull together

the few facts they had, assemble them into a plausible argument. Now from Serry's perspective, the version of the narrative presented to her daughter's class was visibly, plainly destructive. But when she confronted Chloe's teacher about the book, the woman didn't seem to agree.

Serry The teacher really didn't have any problem with it. She actually shrugged her shoulders and said well, this is the district-wide lesson.

Alix Spiegel At that point, Serry's kids were the only practicing Muslims in the school. There was one other Middle Eastern family, but they were secular, and their children were younger, still in kindergarten. In fact, it was pointed out to Serry by school administrators, she was the only parent of any child in the school who had a problem with the 9/11 materials. And then the matter was pretty much dropped by the administration. But moving on was much more difficult for Chloe and her classmates.

Chloe They all saw me as a different person. Before reading the book, I was just a normal child. And then, I turned into an Islamic extremist who hated the world and wanted to kill everybody. And there's a big difference there.

Serry That's when the taunting began. It was just overnight.

Chloe They called me "loser Muslim" and "Osama." They said he was related to me because my mom looks different and she looks like his people. All my friends were starting to question me nonstop. And they were asking me, why does your mom wear that on her head again? And are you sure you're not related to Osama?

Alix Spiegel It got so bad that when Chloe tried to explain to her best friend that none of this was right, that Muslims weren't bad people who wanted to kill everyone, even her best friend could only reluctantly agree.

Chloe She said, "Well OK, if you say it, then I'll believe you. But it's in a book so it must be true." I didn't want them to think about it anymore. Maybe if I just changed the subject each time they brought it up, I could just move on. If we were in the library, I'll just pick a book and say, have you ever read this book? Let's look at it. Or we would talk about horses. But it didn't really seem to work.

Alix Spiegel And so Chloe came up with a different strategy. She decided to renounce her religion. One day that fall, she sat down with her mother and explained that was it all just too much pressure.

Chloe I just thought that I can't be Muslim anymore, because then everybody's going to keep bothering me. Everybody is going to make fun of me. And if I had a mom that didn't wear hijab, maybe they would feel that they could be seen with me and have fun with me.

Alix Spiegel Did she seem sad when you told her that you didn't want to be Muslim anymore?

Chloe Yeah, she seemed very upset.

Alix Spiegel Serry was very upset. For her, faith in God was sustaining. It helped her get up in the morning. But given her daughter's difficult time in school, she and the rest of the family decided to make some adjustments.

Serry We didn't want to force it on her. So in a way, we all kind of stopped practicing the way we did before.

Alix Spiegel They did nothing for Ramadan that year. That was one concession. There were others. And in this way, the family stumbled forward. October came and went. November came and went. And then there was December.

Chloe In December, everything went downhill again. December 1, my teacher said, "We're going to be reading a Christmas book every single day. I have a whole collection. I have hundreds of books at home. And we're going to read them every day."

Alix Spiegel Chloe says the idea of reading a Christmas book every day actually didn't bother her. She did Christmas activities every year, and her family usually went out to celebrate the holiday with one or another of their Christian friends. So Chloe wasn't worried. But then on the fifth day of December, the teacher brought in a book that talked about Jesus' blood, how the blood of God's only son could save you. And to underline her point, she used a visual aid. Here's Serry.

Serry Apparently the teacher had held up a candy cane, passed out candy canes to the class and said, "Look children. Let's reflect on the candy cane. It's in the shape of a J for Jesus. And it has red stripes signifying the blood of Jesus."

Chloe Then, from her own words, she said, "Jesus' blood will save us all. So as long as you're Christian, you'll be saved and you're fine." And that really upset me a lot. I said, "What if we aren't Christians?" She said, "Well, just believe in Jesus and his blood will save you. Jesus' blood will save you."

Alix Spiegel The kids of course picked up on this as well. And the idea that their classmate would go to hell was quickly incorporated into the daily teasing. But the response of her peers wasn't the real issue anymore. Chloe now had bigger problems. She was afraid that she and her family would burn in hellfire for eternity. Serry says she seemed to become obsessed with this idea.

Serry "Are we going to go to hell if I don't believe Jesus' blood saves me? Are we going to go to hell?"

Alix Spiegel How often would she ask you if she was going to go to hell?

Serry Well during the last couple weeks of December, it was pretty much-- it was her focus.

Alix Spiegel She started to get sick, literally physically ill. She would stay home for days at a time. Serry grew more and more concerned. And so over the December break, she set up a meeting with Chloe's teacher and the school's principal. Apparently, this meeting didn't go very well. Serry says the teacher seemed defensive and ended up leaving abruptly.

Now I should say here that I did contact the school to get their side of the story, but they declined to comment because of a pending civil lawsuit. According to Serry, however, the meeting ended on a somewhat promising note. She says she left the school with the distinct impression that the problems between her daughter and her teacher would be addressed. This, however, was not the conclusion presented to Chloe on the morning of her return.

Serry Her teacher approached her in front of the class and said, "You need to transfer to a different classroom. Since you're so uncomfortable, I think you need to transfer to a different classroom." And Chloe said--

Chloe "But I'd like to stay here because all my friends are here." And she said "No, but I insist. You may go transfer to another classroom."

Serry But then some other children in the class called her "loser Muslim." "Get lost, loser Muslim. We don't want you here. Get lost."

Chloe And my teacher was just sitting and watching.

Alix Spiegel Chloe came home that afternoon and immediately got into bed. She didn't want to go to school the next day, told her mother that she never wanted to go again. But the night after she was told to leave, she got a phone call from one of her friends.

Serry Her girlfriend called her and told her she missed her. So that helped her to go to school the next day. But she went into school, and again the kids said "Well why are you here, loser Muslim? The teacher told you to leave. Why are you here?" When she had missed that day before and gone to bed, her teacher had told the class that she was no longer in their class. So when she showed up the next day, the kids wanted to know why she was back. So all through lunch, and then outside at recess, the kids were following her around, telling her she was a loser and they didn't want her in their class.

When I picked her up and brought her home, she was still shaking and crying. And nothing, nothing stopped it. No amount of hugs, no amount of comforting helped. And it was so bad the next morning when she got up, the little blood vessels in her face had burst from just sobbing so hard. And she went to bed, and she didn't get out of bed for five days.

Alix Spiegel It was around this time that Serry's husband also began to go downhill. Serry says that for some reason, watching his daughter's torment seemed to undermine his self-confidence in a way she could never have anticipated. It made him feel helpless.

Serry He just didn't know how to handle it. And he became very depressed, severely depressed. I mean I would go and run some errands, and then I would come back and I'd find her in bed and then him on the couch, just staring at the ceiling.

Alix Spiegel Serry says her husband had never behaved this way before.

Serry No, no, never. He was the kind who would walk into the room and people would just start laughing. He had that effect on people. And he changed.

Chloe I think it did effect him a lot.

Alix Spiegel Chloe, like her mother, says she noticed a distinct change in her father during this time. She tells me about one sad day that winter, when her father took her and her sisters to the park.

Chloe And I came up to him and I said, "Dad, you want to come play with us?" He said, "Um, maybe later. I don't feel so good right now." And that just became his answer to everything. He just sat in front of the TV or he went to bed. And I just thought that's not really him.

I think it was because of what was happening in school. Because I think when he was younger, he went through the same thing. Because over there in Palestine, the Muslims are having trouble. And I just think he felt bad because I was going through it this time.

Alix Spiegel Because of the strain, Serry and her husband began to fight, long arguments about where they had decided to live and the nature of the country that they had made their home.

Serry He thought it was a mistake that he had come to America. And that was difficult for me to hear, because I was the one who brought him to this country. And I was one who said our kids would never have to deal with anything like he dealt with.

Alix Spiegel And so did you try to convince him, no this isn't really what America is like?

Serry Yeah, but it was really difficult to tell him that, when the reality was-- I mean our children, and it wasn't just Chloe anymore. It was even my other girls.

Alix Spiegel Chloe's sister, [? Samia, ?] was punched in the face by the younger brother of one of Chloe's main tormentors. Then Serry's other daughter admitted that the boys at school had been harassing her. Every day or so after lunch, they would surround her on the playground.

Serry They would all point at her and make a motion of unzipping their pants and say, "We're all going to pee on her. Let's all pee on her."

Alix Spiegel But the last straw, as far as Chloe was concerned, happened sometime in late March, the day after she had been transferred against her will to a new classroom. Walking down the hall, she spied the girl who had been her best friend in her old class, probably the only girl who had really stuck by her

through all her trouble. But when Chloe waved, the girl didn't respond.

Chloe I was just kind of thinking maybe she just didn't see me and hear me. But then when I went to lunch, I said hi again. And I went in front of her and I said hi. And she turned her head. And that's when I knew. Everybody has turned against me. I dropped out from there. I stayed home for a long time.

Alix Spiegel For the rest of her fourth grade year, Chloe was tutored. The school found someone to come twice a week. Now I should say that while I was not able to speak to the school about what happened, the US Department of Justice, which eventually got involved in this case, was able to confirm the broad outlines of Chloe and Serry's story, including that the teacher behaved inappropriately by proselytizing during class time in a public school, and that the teacher's behavior towards Chloe contributed to an atmosphere in which Chloe was harassed by her peers.

The man that I spoke to at the Justice Department was Eric Treene who supervises cases of religious discrimination. He told me that Justice first learned about Chloe's case during one of the post 9/11 get-togethers that the department now holds with a variety of Muslim groups.

Eric Treene At one of these meetings, a woman from a Muslim women's group brought up this case and said, well is this the type of case you might be able to do anything about? And we said, well yes. We thoroughly investigated the situation. We believed that certain action, remedial action, was merited here. And we reached an agreement with the school district requiring such remedial action.

Alix Spiegel In other words, the school district ended up settling the Justice Department's claims against them. Now because there was a settlement, the Justice Department can't discuss the details of the case. Can't tell us, for example, which of the allegations made by Serry and Chloe they were able to verify. Treene, however, was able to say this about what the school ultimately agreed to.

Eric Treene All teachers would receive diversity training, as would all students. And then there would be, for this particular teacher, specific performance goals that had to be met and oversight. And they needed to report to us on both the general program of diversity training, as well as the goals set forth for this particular teacher.

Alix Spiegel That agreement was reached in March of 2005. But according to Serry, by that time it was too late, way too late. See, during the summer after Chloe's fourth grade year, Serry and her husband decided to transfer all their kids to a different school. She says they wanted to start again. They met with district administrators and asked for a placement in a school where their kids would know that they were safe.

But in late summer, the district people said that they couldn't offer any absolute assurances that the children wouldn't face harassment. And as far as Serry was concerned, that meant just one thing. The family would have to move. She couldn't take another year of turmoil.

Serry So over a few weeks' time, we literally packed up, and we pretty much were forced to leave.

Alix Spiegel Serry remembers sitting down with her husband to try to figure out whether the family should move east, west, north or south. But her husband had a very different idea.

Serry When it came time for us to move from where we were, he wanted to leave the country, which I couldn't fathom. And so he wound up leaving us. He wound up just walking out one day.

Alix Spiegel Serry naturally was devastated. She loved her husband. She loves her husband. But she didn't want to move back to the West Bank, and that was the place her husband yearned to go. He argued that at least everyone in the West Bank had the same problem, was in the same boat. And for him, that made the difficulties bearable. In America, he said, you face the same troubles, but you face them alone. Serry didn't see things that way at all. She says that because she grew up in this country, she just had a more subtle reading of what had happened to her family.

Serry In other words-- well I was born and raised in this country, and I'm aware of what makes this country great, and I know that what happened to our family, it doesn't speak to American values. And I feel like this is such a fluke. I have to believe this is not what America is about. I know that. But I don't think that's the same for my husband. I think he came to this country with certain hopes and dreams, and it was pretty much a big letdown.

Alix Spiegel Today, Serry lives alone with her five children in a small apartment about an hour away from her old town. Instead of being a full time mom, as she was for over a decade, she has two jobs and goes to school at night. This means that she rarely sees her children. To keep up with their lives, she has built a mailbox for the kitchen counter. She asks her kids to write her letters about their lives, what happened to them during the day, week. And then, late at night after they've gone to sleep, she sits alone in her bed and reads them. She says that when they don't make her cry, they make her laugh.

It's been almost a year since her husband walked out, went to live with a cousin in a distant state while the family tries to figure out what to do. Serry says that every night she prays for him to come back to her, but they only talk sporadically. Still, she hasn't changed her feelings about moving to the West Bank or her interpretation of what happened to her children and family.

Serry I have to believe this was a fluke. I have to. Otherwise, it's really hard to keep moving forward. But I also think it's a sign of our times. It's happening all across America. It's not just happening in our little town here. We hear stories of different things going on in schools, and places of employment, and public places, in restaurants.

Alix Spiegel From his post at the Justice Department, Eric Treene, in his own way, has seen the same thing.

Eric Treene There's been a dramatic rise in hate crimes since 9/11 against Muslims, Arabs,

Sikhs, who are often mistaken as being Muslim, and South Asians. And sometimes people with dark skin, such as a Portuguese man, just because they're perceived to be Arab or Muslim.

Alix Spiegel In fact, says Treene, since 9/11, one in five of the complaints reviewed by the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission involves a case of discrimination against Muslims. That number, one in five, is of course totally out of proportion to the number of Muslims that live in America.

As for Chloe, she's now happy in her new school, and so far hasn't encountered any problems. She's even gone back to being Muslim.

Chloe I pray and occasionally will go to the mosque and everything. And we celebrated Ramadan.

Alix Spiegel And how did that feel?

Chloe It felt good.

Alix Spiegel But, she says, she never acknowledges her religion to her new friends, or really to anyone at her new school. It just wouldn't be a good idea, she tells me.

Chloe We're still going through war and everything, and it's just so a bad time.

Ira Glass Alix Spiegel in Washington, DC. Coming up, now a quick word from our friendly sponsor, who happens to be the world's only superpower. How to explain America in 30 seconds on television to people far, far away. That's in a minute from Chicago Public Radio and Public Radio International when our program continues.

Act Two. America, The Ad Campaign.

Ira Glass It's *This American Life* from Ira Glass. Each week on our program we choose a theme, bring you a variety of different kinds of stories on that theme. Today's show, Shouting Across the Divide, stories of Muslims and non-Muslims trying to communicate with each other, and running into some difficulty sometimes doing that. We have arrived at Act Two of our program. Act Two, America the Ad Campaign.

Not long after September 11, as the United States started to fight the Taliban in Afghanistan, there came to be a great interest in this country in bolstering America's image abroad among people who did not seem to see us the way that we see ourselves. We wanted to change that. And one man who got swept up in that effort was one of our regular contributors here at our radio show, Shalom Auslander. Here he is.

Shalom Auslander I worked for an advertising agency in New York City. A major soft drink company needed some commercials for the urban youth market. This meant black kids. They wanted a magic

liquid campaign. This meant that someone in the commercial would drink the soda and become magically transformed. The unhappy would become happy. The stupid would become smart. The unpopular would become beloved. I showed them some commercials a week later.

One commercial took place at a swimming pool where the kids were unhappy. Then they drank the soda. Then they were happy. A long, uncomfortable silence filled the room. Finally, the chief creative director spoke. "Do black kids swim?" he asked. A long debate followed. I hated my job.

Three months after 9/11, a meeting was held in the chief creative director's office. America had an image problem in the Muslim world, and the State Department had asked a number of advertising agencies to help fix it. Our agency was one of them. "It wasn't just a chance to help the country," said the chief creative director, "it was a chance to help earn some positive PR for the agency by doing something good." As he spoke the word good, he made quotation marks in the air with his fingers.

Nobody wanted to work on it. There were a half dozen senior creative directors below the chief creative director, each of whom was responsible for his or her own accounts. Their job performance, salaries, and raises were evaluated in terms of how much money their accounts made or lost over the course of the year. "I don't have time for this pro bono crap," said one. "I mean, I'd love to help, but my software client is up my wazoo with a pitch fork." Others nodded. "Are they doing TV?" asked one. "It's possible," said the chief creative director, "but it won't run in this country." Everyone groaned. If the ads didn't air on American television, then they weren't eligible for American advertising awards shows.

Most of the creative directors bailed. I was a freelancer at the time, a hired gun. I worked on whatever they told me to work on. The briefing would be later that afternoon. The chief creative director followed me out the door. "Don't let this interfere with the soda account," he said. "We really have to nail that."

I decided to get some lunch. A message was waiting for me when I returned. The account director on Project Dialogue had phoned. That was the code name for the brand America account, Project Dialogue. I phoned her back. "Do you need an Arab?" she asked. "Hello?" "Do you need an Arab?" "I don't need an Arab." "OK" "Thanks though." "If you need one, let me know. We can get you one." "I'm good."

I took a bite of my chicken sandwich, and flipped through the newspapers and magazines that had collected on my desk. *Advertizing Age* had a cover story on why it's so hard to cram the benefits of brand USA into a 30-second spot and what might work. They had interviewed famous creative directors across the nation. "You have to infiltrate their lives," said one. "You set up events. You show them movies." He suggested *Boogie Nights*.

The Project Dialogue briefing was supposed to begin at 3:00, but trouble on an international cosmetics account pushed it back to 4:00. And news of a possible fast-food pitch pushed it back again until 5:00. Finally, at 5:45, the creative director arrived. He glanced at his watch. "Christ almighty," he said. "Let's get this over with."

The lights dimmed and the Powerpoint presentation began. As with any other target audience, Muslims had been divided into a few different groups. Likely to agree, the moderate Muslims. Unlikely to agree,

the radical Muslims. And the undecideds. A red arrow appeared beside the word "undecideds" and began to flash. "This," said the strategic planner, "is our sweet spot."

A few slides later, the undecideds were further broken down into three more subgroups. The hero worshipers, the economic hopefuls, and the future seekers, each of which was divided again into another three groups, all nine of which would require their own distinct form of messaging. "What's the message?" someone asked. "We don't know," answered the strategic planner. "Do they like humor?" someone asked. "We don't know." "Do they trust commercials?" "We don't know." "Are there any commercials they do like?" "We don't know?" "Is a direct approach the best?" "No." "How will they react to an indirect approach?" "Badly."

For a group of people setting out to convince another group of people how much we had in common, we didn't seem to know the first thing about them. And I was no exception. The only footage I had ever seen of Afghanistan was of madrassas. Row after row of children rocking back and forth reciting passages loudly from the Koran, a sight so eerily similar to the childhood I'd spent locked up like a veal in an orthodox Jewish yeshiva that I wanted to bomb the place myself.

The strategic planner told us that basic messaging concepts were still being tested in focus groups in Egypt and Jordan. And we wouldn't have the final strategy until the following afternoon. The basic function, though, of all communications would be to convince the Muslim world that we all wanted a better life, and that freedom and democracy were the best ways of achieving those desires. I realized that if you switched freedom and democracy with cool and refreshing, it was pretty much the same strategy as the one I'd been given for selling soda to African American kids. But I thought it might be best to bring this up after the meeting.

"So what do you think?" the creative director asked me after the meeting. "I think it's the same strategy as the soda account." "How is that going?" he asked. "Good," I said. "I've been thinking. What if we change it from a swimming pool to a picnic." He thought about that for a moment before frowning and shaking his head. "No good?" I asked. He continued shaking his head. "Black kids don't have picnics?" I asked. "More urban," he said, "you know, like fire hydrants." "Fire hydrants?" "Yeah," he said "you know, when they open the fire hydrants. When it's hot." "Sure," I said. "When it's hot."

I assumed we would cut before the cops came and started beating the kids with their night sticks. He nodded, growing increasingly pleased with his idea. "I like that," he said. "A bunch of kids in their bathing suits, jumping around a fire hydrant. We'll get somebody good to direct it. That could be nice, don't you think?" I nodded. "Do black kids have bathing suits?" I asked. "I mean, if they don't swim?" "I like that," he ignored me. "I like that a lot. "Write a few more like that, will you?" "Sure," I said. "How's Friday?" "How's tomorrow?" he asked. "Tomorrow," I said, "no problem."

The following morning I was sitting in my office writing commercials about black kids and fire hydrants when there was a knock on my door. I looked up to see a man roughly my age with dark skin, slicked back hair, and a drawing pad. "Shalom?" he asked. "I'm Sabhi." I rose and shook his hand. "You must be the Arab," I said. "I'm the Jew."

Sabhi was from Lebanon where he had studied graphic arts at the University of Beirut. I asked him what life was like there, how people felt about America, how they felt about their lives and their future. He told me there was a lot of anger and a lot of frustration. There were economic problems, governmental problems, social problems. I asked him what the cause of the problems might be. He told me it was the Jews.

"The Jews?" I asked. "The Israelis," he said. He explained that according to Islamic legend, the prophet Mohammed said they would never be peace in the Muslim world until three cities were under Muslim rule. They currently had Mecca and Medina, but Jerusalem was still controlled by the Jews. "The Jews?" I asked. "The Israelis," he said. "And so," he added, "that's why there can be no peace for Muslims."

An awkward silence followed and an unexpected disappointment overcame me. I realize that as naive as it might have been to think that advertising could solve these century-old problems, a small part of me, and a large part of the US government, hoped that it could. That something, anything, might be said or filmed or edited into a 30-second TV commercial that would undo all that had been so horribly done, and that would avoid all the bad that seemed so certain to come in the future.

Unfortunately, I was raised with orthodox religion. And the minute I hear people talking about prophets and holy cities, I lose all hope. That, combined with yesterday's discussion about whether black people swim, and if they do, whether or not they own bathing suits, had caused me to wonder whether we could ever understand the person living right beside us, let alone people on the other side of the world.

"Well, you've got Mecca and Medina," I offered Sabhi. "Two out of three isn't bad." He kind of laughed. I kind of laughed back. Then he left. The telephone rang. "How did it go?" asked the account director. "Fine," I said. "Was it helpful?" "Very," I said. "Should I get you another one?" she asked.

The focus groups in Jordan and Egypt had not been very helpful. The moderator had shown a number of different boards to a number of different Arab men ages 18 to 34. The first board read, "Children deserve a happy future. And in order to have a happy future, people must be free." "Do you agree with this statement?" asked the moderator. Everyone nodded. "But we don't have freedom," said one, "because of Israel." Everyone nodded.

The moderator held up a second board. "We all deserve happiness," read the board, "and part of happiness is having the freedom to pursue your business and economic dreams." Everyone nodded. "We could pursue our economic dreams," said one, "if it weren't for Israel." This continued for some time. It continued with women age 18 to 34. It continued with men age 35 to 50. It continued with women age 35 to 50.

"Were they all like that?" I asked the strategic planner. He nodded. "What are you going to do?" I asked. "Get off this goddamn assignment," he said.

There was a four o'clock meeting later that afternoon for me to present my new soda commercials. I made my way to the creative director's office a few minutes early and asked if I could speak with him. "I can't work on this America thing," I told him. "Why not?" he asked. "Did you come up with anything?"

"I've got a slogan," I told him. "Two out of three ain't bad. It's about the holy cities."

On the television behind his desk, Geraldo Rivera was reporting from Tora Bora. "We want Osama bin Laden behind bars," said Geraldo. "Or six feet under. Or maybe just one foot under. Or maybe just a pile of ash." They cut back to Laurie Dhue in the studio. "Well said Geraldo," said Laurie Dhue. The creative director sighed and shook his head. "It's hopeless, isn't it?" he said. "Mankind?" I asked. "Yes," I said, "it is."

We went into the conference room and I presented my black kids around a fire hydrant commercial. For the next 20 minutes, 15 Caucasian people sat around a long, oak table discussing whether or not fire hydrants were racist. And if they weren't, would black kids have bathing suits, given that they don't swim?

I still hated my job, but at least I was off the America thing. Within a few months, everyone was off it. After dozens of focus groups and tens of thousands of dollars, the only conclusion anyone could reach regarding the question of how to speak to Muslims was that nobody had any idea how to speak to Muslims.

It wasn't long before the department within the State Department that had been charged with this assignment was dismantled. A few projects survived. Some radio stations were jammed. Some leaflets were dropped. Then Iraq was invaded. Then Shiites began killing Sunnis. Then Sunnis began killing Shiites.

Maybe it was naive, but five years ago when all this was happening, someone said, let's talk to Muslims. Lately, more and more people are saying, let's not. Let's let Iran talk to them. Let's let Syria talk to them. Let's let the Muslims talk to themselves.

My fire hydrant commercials never ran either. In the end, it was felt that the fire hydrants might be perceived as racist. And they were replaced in the script with swimming pools and diving boards, scripts a moderator then showed to a roomful of African Americans age 16 to 21.

"Do you like these commercials?" the moderator asked. Everyone frowned. "Black kids don't swim," said the African Americans age 16 to 21. Someone suggested the location should be more urban, a city perhaps, maybe a fire hydrant. The moderator nodded. A few weeks later, the project was reassigned to an African American agency. It was thought best that they talked to themselves.

Ira Glass Shalom Auslander. He's the author of a book of short stories called *Beware of God*. A new book about his own very strict religious upbringing comes out next year.

Credits.

Ira Glass Our program was produced today by Alix Spiegel and myself with Alex Blumberg, Diane Cook, Jane Feltes, Sarah Koenig, Lisa Pollak, and Nancy Updike. Our senior producer is Julie Snyder.

Elizabeth Meister runs our website. Production help from Seth Lind and Cathy Hoang. Music help from Jessica Hopper.

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WBEZ management oversight for our program by Mr. Torey Malatia. You know he just invited me to his house party for the weekend.

Shalom Auslander A bunch of kids in their bathing suits, jumping around a fire hydrant. That could be nice, don't you think?

Ira Glass I'm Ira Glass. Back next week with more stories of *This American Life*.

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