Fear, Loathing, and Denial

Fourteen years go I tried to shield an undergraduate from hate. I shouldn't have.

BY HILAL ISLER | **In the summer of 2001, I began graduate school at Penn in higher-education management**, with the hope that it would lead to a nice paycheck and some job stability. I lived in Hill House as a graduate assistant, and was tasked with helping 60 freshmen transition to college. I was one of those over-eager GAs, drumming on residents' doors early on a Saturday, wanting to go to the dining hall en masse.

If you'd asked me that August, I would have told you I was at Penn to write a dissertation on outsourcing or marketing or something Wharton-y like that. But then the September 11 attacks happened, and changed everything for me. That day was a singular moment in my life that led almost immediately to a rare sort of clarity. It's a focus that I think only disaster can bring: a sudden understanding of what is important, and needs to be protected in the world.

I remember the night of 9/11, most of all: how I had propped my door open, and the kids had trickled in, all 60 of them. How we had huddled around my tiny television set: bewildered, hugging each other, watching the footage of the planes hitting the towers over and over and over again. Some of the students had parents who worked in the Financial District, or even in the towers themselves, and we had taken turns trying to call in, to get through when the lines were jammed.

I don't remember falling asleep that night—we couldn't have gotten that much sleep—but when I woke up the following morning, I found the front of my door had been vandalized. I was stunned and embarrassed. "Go home, you fucking sand-nigger" was perhaps the most illuminating of the messages, in that it offered a directive, while simultaneously pointing the finger. This is your fault, it seemed to say, and you need to be sent home for it.

There were many problems with this, not the least of which was the fact that I consider the United States my home. There is no other place I want to be. Then there was the issue of blame by proxy. Was this my fault somehow? Was I guilty, because I was born Turkish? Muslim? I certainly *felt* guilty that morning. I felt responsible.

I walked down the hallway, feeling foggy, and stopped when I got to the other end. Another door had been chosen, too. Same handwriting, similar missives. That door belonged to an international student. He was 18. Just a week before, his family had asked me to take care of him. "It's his first time away from home," his dad had explained, his aged eyes soft and vulnerable, and I had promised him his son was in good hands. Of course he was.

And so on September 12, while the floor was still quiet, and the day freshly broken, I took a sponge and, with those good hands, I scrubbed that door clean. Then,

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I went back to my room, shut my own door, and began to cry.

Later that week, I decided that if this had happened here, it was also probably happening elsewhere. So I approached my house dean, Amy Pollock, who, with great compassion, encouraged me to reach out across campus to summon the students who might be impacted in the aftermath. I didn't know what I was doing at the time, but it was my first attempt at community organizing. I had free pizza, and a member of the Penn Counseling Center on hand to answer questions, except nobody showed up. No one. I had to give the pizza away, entire boxes.

So I tried again. And again. And again. For two years, I was dogged about chipping away at the fear that was silencing so many. Eventually I learned about the Sikh kid who had his head cracked against a giant flowerpot by a group of strangers. There was the sophomore whose life had been threatened by a middle-aged man in a car. There was the mosque that had been vandalized, and a nearby gurdwara that had been torched. "Go home" was always the refrain.

In times of violence and uncertainty, it's perhaps a human impulse to look for someone to blame, someone to hit and strangle and spit at. It's perhaps also instinctive, in response to trauma like this, to pull away—to hide inside your shell, to wait out the storm in solitude.

But it doesn't have to be this way.

In February, my Twitter feed flooded with news of a shooting in Chapel Hill, North Carolina. Three Muslim American students, all under the age of 25, had been shot, execution-style, by a man who may or may not have carried out a hate crime. They were killed near the University of North Carolina campus, after an apparent dispute over a parking spot.

There was history here, according to the victims' parents. In previous instances the man had come to their door, armed with a rifle, threatening them. It's unclear whether or not any of this was reported to the police.

Perhaps the students were scared to draw attention to what was happening to them. Perhaps they didn't want to rock the boat. Perhaps they'd grown accustomed to living life in a state of apology for something they hadn't done. The youngest victim would have been about five years old when the Twin Towers fell.

We know we have a choice, when faced with hate. Either we can stay where we are—small and angry and scared—or we can take a path that goes beyond that. We can talk. Not *about* each other, not *at* each other, but *to* each other. We can see that burying feelings, or stuffing them down the barrel of a rifle, doesn't solve anything at all. In fact, it only makes things worse.

To this day, the kid, the one down the hall at Hill House, doesn't know what happened to his door the night after September 11. And that's my fault. I did that. I denied him a chance to see, to explain, to confront, and ultimately to understand what was happening around him, and to him. By denying those words, scrubbing at the surface of them, by erasing the hurt that had found its way to his front door, I was denying the wounds that put them there in the first place. And denying hurt doesn't make it disappear. It only makes the hurt grow stronger. Sometimes, even strong enough to pull the trigger. ◈

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MLWM-14-02352_local ad AR37QHTQ 03/2014

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