

Strength in Silence and Through Actions
Marwah Ibrahim
Queens College
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I can rewind this defining moment of history in my personal life like a movie in my mind. I was simply a teenager with a growing sense of my identity and understanding of the world. Despite being a teenager, however, the safe environment by which my parents kept me in by placing the invisible fences that separated me from the outside and sometimes cruel world was shown by the innocence that was seen in how I was. Even though my parents attempted to shield me from the unpleasant realities of the world, I eventually had to swallow the bitter pill of this rather difficult reality of the world on my own. This brief moment in my life that I faced, which happened to be one of the few, simply added on to one of the times I would deal with—and it would yet again shatter this secure world I understood and was placed in for so long.

During the younger and care-free days of high school, I was just another teenager trying to get through my own realities. In this time, young teenagers are trying to find out which piece of the puzzle they want to fit into out of the other pieces that make up the high school community. They also want to figure out who they are, and I was no exception. Although I wanted to feel like an adult, I was a young, vulnerable, and shy tenth grader who understood the world inaccurately in some ways and with eyes that viewed it as largely innocent and incorrupt. Unbeknownst to myself, I would come across a question that was about me from a complete stranger—a question that would break that secure world I was in.

I was going back home from school following a long afternoon of doing a regents review class in chemistry. Excited as I was to just unwind and daydream into my own world on the long way back home on the subway, there was nothing out of the ordinary on that particular ride. It was crowded and during the rush hour as people were attending to their own life as they often did in NYC. Suddenly, as a young woman rose up from her seat to make her exit to her stop, she exclaimed, “Why should they live here?!” to another woman. I was sitting just a matter of a few

feet away from where she made that harsh wonder that pierced sharply through my ears. I immediately raised my head and my attention drew towards her as she said it loud enough for me to acknowledge. A few moments later, the train steadily slowed down to get to the woman's destination. I continued to intently watch her as she made her way past those double doors. She blended in with the crowd and continued on until I no longer saw her.

The question that this passenger made about why I should even reside in America was one that touched on the aspects of being seen as unwelcome, an outcast, and inhuman. What exactly prompted her to ask this question? I did not know her or even approach her...I was simply wearing the headscarf and the traditional Islamic dress that was a part of the school uniform—that was it. My presence was enough validation for her to render me unwelcome in a country where everyone has their own piece to take. I was left speechless and shocked the very moment that question crossed paths with my ears. It was a defining moment of tasting that bitter pill of what the world was really like sometimes.

I have encountered name-calling in the past to which I had become desensitized to because it was all too common to hear. However, to be implied that I was not welcome in the heartland of America was unique for me to hear because I was in fact from America. I was born and raised in New York all of my life by my immigrant parents who came overseas to claim their piece of America. This question of why I should live in America was not one to be taken lightly and it felt painstakingly overwhelming to take in the woman's question. I simply watched on as she made her exit and as I did not say a single word, but the feelings I had were all making their way through the nerves in my body.

Being so young, it was easy to get defeated by other people's questions and comments because I was timid. When the passenger asked that question, I was too numb to even reply. The

time was passing by as she made her way past me and as my mind was still processing what she demandingly asked. Looking back at that episode, there were times I felt like maybe I was weak because I did not have the “courage” to defend myself right there—however, reflecting on this moment now, I realize that my silence was actually an act of courage already. It was in this moment of my life where my personality of being non-confrontational really benefited me. That secure world my parents brought me up in was beneficial. My inability to be confrontational was due in part by the innocence I grew up in. I couldn’t be angry enough to say something back to the woman who asked why people like me should live in America; however, someone who remains silent in a moment of being offended is not necessarily a sign of weakness.

It takes a special kind of strength to actually remain peaceful in a moment of being disrespected and marginalized just for someone being who he/she is. Controlling anger is indeed much harder than acting on it—and that is why remaining silent can actually reflect strength. Based on a hadith (Hadiths are a collection of what the Prophet of Islam, Prophet Muhammad (P.B.U.H.) said and did in his lifetime), there is one that focuses on how strength is defined: “In another *hadith*, Abu Hurairah related that the Messenger of Allah, *sallallahu 'alayhi wasallam*, said: ‘A strong person is not the person who throws his adversaries to the ground. A strong person is the person who contains himself when he is angry.’ [Al-Bukhari; Book 47, No. 47.3.12],” (ahadith.co.uk, [APA], n.d.).

I could have expressed my anger in response to what the woman said. However, as I look at it now, I realize that controlling anger in general helps emotions from escalating. Her question was the fire and I was the water that extinguished it. I didn’t say anything back out of shock; however, my action was not one of cowardice because I remained silent. My action rather demonstrated non-confrontation and peace. I could have chosen to let the woman’s question get

to my nerves and made a comment; however, Muniza mentions that there is a hadith stated in Al-Bukhari that helps Muslims know the etiquette of self-control when it comes to speech: “Abu Hurairah narrated that Prophet Muhammad SAW said, *‘Whoever believes in God and the Last Day should speak a good word or remain silent...’*” (Muniza, 2019, para. 3).

I also realize that if I want the world to be a more peaceful place, I have to do my part. I need to act on the change I wish to see as Allah (God) states in the Holy Quran (the Holy Book of Muslims), “...Verily! Allah will not change the good condition of a people as long as they do not change their state of goodness themselves...” (The Qur’an 13:11).

Looking at what strength means to me now when I heard that question from the woman, I realized that I didn’t have to prove that strength to her by saying anything but that I had continued to carry on strongly with Allah’s help in my life. Hearing her question caused a feeling of being hurt at that very moment but I did not let it define my worth of being in America. Just as she posed her question as to why I was even welcome in my own home, I did not welcome her question to break me. I continued to have my piece of America, going after having my chance of achieving goals, continuing school, and continuously growing in New York. I went on to having my own family that also claim their piece of America. I also chose to be kind to myself and approve of who I am while I keep trying to mold into something I want to be.

References:

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