

My Reflections on The Unrest, Justice and Our Future

Assalam Aleikum wa Rahmatullahi wa Barakatuhu

The past few weeks have been very difficult for so many in our community and has led me reflect on the ways that racism and injustice seep into our everyday lives, and, hopefully, how we can learn and improve.

I am deeply saddened by the horrific way that George Floyd was killed. The terrible truth is that his death is one of many violent murders of African Americans due to racism, intolerance, and deeply ingrained injustice. The videos and stories of these tragedies have given me a better perspective on how difficult it is to be black in America.

Like any immigrant, when I first came to the US, I had little knowledge about systemic racism and the history of African Americans in this country. It wasn't until I enrolled in the Urban Principalship Program at Indiana University where I gained more knowledge about the racial injustice the black community has endured and still faces. The African American professors challenged their students, including myself, to get out of our comfort zone to discuss topics like slavery, segregation, equity, and social justice. Being a minority myself (the only Muslim student), it was my African American professors who always ensured that I was included and not left out. That is a spirit we foster at our own school, MTI School of Knowledge, and it started at the beginning. MTI began as a home-schooling program over 25 years ago by four devoted African American sisters: Sr. Muslimah Mustafa, Sr. Jamila Al-Khattab, Sr. Mu'mina Blackman, and Sr. Saeeda Amatullah. These sisters created a culture of demanding academic growth paired with an unwavering emphasis on developing the highest Islamic character of the students.

When I first came to MTI School of Knowledge in 2008 as a high school mathematics teacher, I didn't know that Allah had placed me into a very real and largely rare model of a diverse Muslim community.

My first true interaction with the African American community was with their children. I was honored to teach my first group of exceptional, respectful and talented African American students at MTI School of Knowledge. Their names and faces are fresh to me even now; Ayesha Cain, Mansor Blackman, Mark Cain, Khadija Abdullah, Terry Ship, and Hadeiyah Ameen. I learned through their exceptional Islamic behavior and manners as much as I taught them as a math instructor.

I still have much more to learn. Not long ago, as we discussed an issue of racism, one of my African American students told me, "You don't understand." we left it there. It bothered me for a long time. Did the student mean I don't understand the pain of racism? Or the trauma of injustice and daily fears of discrimination? Or was it broader...the pain of hundreds of years of torture and killing because of your color? Did I not understand the structural barriers to equity or the pain of slavery? With just the questions it raised, it was clear the student was right. I don't understand. I cannot fully know. It re-ignited my passion and belief that schools, and

communities give their very best to work together, stand together, learn together and fight against the daily pain of long-standing racial injustice.

Through the years here, I've found amazing support, mentoring and friendship from my African American sisters including Sr. Shukryah Mustafa, Sr. Saffiyah Mustafa, Sr. Halima Al-Khattab, Sr. Khadijah Mohamed, Sr. Rachel Wilkerson, Sr. Naadirah Lovelace and Sr. Anita Wilkerson. My gratitude for them overflows. One thing I have learned from them is that there is no better way to create change than through education. We cannot accept racism and inequity as it exists today. And so we must take steps to improve. As the Prophet Mohammed (PBUH) said, "An Arab has no superiority over a non-Arab, nor a non-Arab has any superiority over an Arab; also a white has no superiority over a black, nor a black has any superiority over white except by piety and good action."

It is our responsibility to talk with our kids about what is going on. We urge our families to talk with each other about the protests and the reasons behind them. At MTI, we will be holding sessions for open discussion about racism and intolerance. As our students and community try to make sense of what is happening, we will provide counseling and unwavering support. MTI will undergo staff and teacher training in implicit bias, and we will re-examine our curriculum to incorporate contributions to Islam and/or America made by African Americans.

I am eternally proud of our school and our community. I have been blessed by Allah to be welcomed into it. InshaAllah, MTI School of Knowledge will be a beacon of hope that is committed to eliminating racial and social injustice, so that one day, a student might look at me and say, "You DO understand."

Heba Elshakmak

MTI School of Knowledge, Principal