

## **Seeking Justice for Muslim Women: Riffat Hassan**

**Cecile S. Holmes**

**R**iffat Hassan is always responding to challenges to her understanding of Islam. Her perspective springs from the Qu'ranic teaching that service to God cannot be separated from service to humanity. From there, she plows a centrist furrow through world politics, religion and scholarship.

Her chosen course means opposing Islamic extremists, building bridges among faiths and engaging in political activism. Riffat works with such passion that I find myself wanting to find others to help her accomplish her goals.

She takes her mandate to involvement from Islam's history, tradition and scripture. Her words, her life, her writing, even her personal style defy every stereotype of Islam. Though once married, she is now divorced. The mother of a grown daughter, she has found she prefers being alone much of the time. She has no formal connection with a mosque, but says her study of the Qu'ran has "greatly deepened" her faith, bringing new meaning to her work and shaping her intellectually and spiritually.

"I do pray," Riffat says when I press for details. "Most of the time I cannot do fasting now—I have so many medications (that I take). I have never had very profound connection to a mosque. I'm much happier praying at home."

The confidence unnerves me a little, but it also pleases me. I like Riffat's individualistic style and her candor. In casual or formal conversation, she never resorts to being "the expert," the distant academic who knows so much. She is so sharp, so well read that I'd gladly act the disciple, but she never offers me that chance. Instead, she enriches my knowledge, just as she did the first time we met.

Islam is much more respectful of women's leadership than many people think, Riffat tells me. The wives of the Prophet Muhammad—Khadijah, A'ishah, and Rabi'a al-Basri, an amazing woman from Islam's mystical Sufi strand—enlighten and engage others in Islam's early history, she says, citing historical sources

to underscore her perspective that Islam should not suppress its women, but honor their gifts and leadership.

Complicating the situation for Muslim women are Islam's tensions with the West. Those date back much further than the terrorist attacks of Sept. 11, 2001 or even the Iran hostage crisis of 1979, Riffat says.

Centuries ago, the faith's tensions with the West were political, not religious. Muhammad began to spread his message after a series of revelations. Through those, he was convinced of his relationship to God, of what he received from God, of God's goodness and of his obligations to God for that goodness. Much of Islam's turf for converts was found in Christian territory. "Virtually since the beginning, Islam has been seen not only as the other, but also as the enemy," Riffat explains.

A brilliant scholar with a 69-page curriculum vita and currently a professor of religious studies at the University of Louisville, Riffat is an imposing intelligence under any circumstances. Her spirit runs off an even deeper underground stream. It takes time to get beneath her many activities, to plumb the wellspring suggested by her deep brown eyes, to understand how hard she worked to achieve so many good things, not just for herself, but for thousands of other women. Many of those victories were born in cross-cultural circles, in her interactions with people of other faiths.

When I first met her 12 years ago, her knowledge and her energy overwhelmed me. She spoke of Islam as a religion of peace, of justice. I resonated to that description, linking it to my own understanding of Christianity. If Jesus truly is the great liberator and the great physician, then I cannot help but believe he would have befriended Muhammad, Buddha and other spiritual figures throughout history. And I cannot help but think that Christians today are called to preach and work for peace with people of other faiths.

Still, I am familiar with the barriers Westerners find in Islam. The faith often is mind-boggling to me, and, like other women, I am deeply troubled by the patriarchy dominating Islam's public profile. The patriarchal strands woven into Islam dismay Riffat just as similar patterns in Judaism and Christianity anger women in those faiths. Riffat worries especially that Muslim men interpret their tradition so that religion continues to be used "as an instrument of oppression rather than as a means of liberation." Her voice shifts as she makes this point, her tone moving from measured and matter-of-fact to a higher, more urgent pitch.

"I think that because women in a sense have so much more life experience than men have, being involved in this whole process of giving birth, women are natural caretakers, nurturers," Riffat says. "They are more earth-based. They develop within

themselves certain attributes, insights or wisdom or strength which men and patriarchal patterns would deprive them of. Consequently when this happens (to women), many parts of their spirits or their minds do not grow.”

Indeed, repressive theologies can undermine a woman’s sense of hope and wholeness. Over time, her thirst to know the deepest parts of her soul and to explore her role in the universe lessens. For like any creative pursuit, personal spirituality blossoms if cultivated. If instead, the youthful plant of a woman’s soul is restrained and forced to conform, its growth will be stunted. And it may wither and die.

In her book, *Radical Wisdom: A Feminist Mystical Theology*, Beverly J. Lanzetta turns to female contemplatives—including Julian of Norwich and Teresa of Avila— to uncover a path from oppression to liberation. She calls this path the *via feminine*. Lanzetta suggests unjust social and political realities can hinder a woman’s spiritual growth as much as patriarchal theologies.

Lanzetta uncovers a forgotten connectedness in Christian history for Christian women. Coming from a different but related viewpoint, Riffat says the connectedness of women’s experiences opens them to new understandings. “I have seen women who are totally illiterate possess a deep spirituality for human beings. I think women have learned from all this connectedness.”

That very sense of connectedness drives me and helps me focus when I'm writing. It's been something I've felt in my bones since childhood. But modern life in the Western world makes it so very hard to keep track of that reality. When day-to-day existence and survival are based more on what we earn, how hard we work, and how much we accomplish, I think we forget or never learn the connectedness we might find in our souls. Getting attuned to the deeper side of life is less difficult for me than staying attuned.

It is the lives and witness of women like Riffat who proclaim value in women who are learned and in women who are illiterate that I can sense, then feel, the connectedness. And in Riffat's story, I realize that if there is one woman like her, there must be others.

The goal of all Riffat's speeches, her papers, her presentations, of all her work in interfaith dialogue is "liberation, fulfillment," she says.

"How do you envision God?" I ask, and she doesn't even pause. Her low voice almost caresses the thoughts she discloses. No, she doesn't envision God exactly as a person. "I can only envision God in metaphorical terms," she says. "God is light. God is energy. God is power. God is the source of creation.

"God cannot be localized and yet God is something that is within you and outside of you. It's the name of all the ultimate realities."

Listening, I can feel it. She is talking with the conviction of someone who has encountered God with

her mind and her heart.

“It’s like a soul recognizes a soul,” she continues. “When I meet a soulful person, I can recognize that. Every living being has a soul, but the soul is not equally developed in people. Soul is the ultimate reality of a person. It may be an instinct, but when I meet a spiritual person, I can tell, I can feel that person is special. And some of the most deeply spiritual people I have met are not Muslim. But it doesn’t matter. I think they are on the same path in some way.”

Riffat could have shut herself away in academia’s ivory tower, researching, publishing and teaching. Her life’s work instead is about fostering change, especially in the minds and hearts of Muslim women. For them, she opens a window into new understandings of the Qu’ran, freeing many previously trapped by misbegotten understandings of their religious tradition.

When Riffat speaks, I listen. When I read what she writes, my head swirls with new ideas, viewpoints and concepts. The first time I met her, she literally opened my mind. I didn’t know Muslim feminists existed. When I interviewed her for this book, I was gratified to discover that even though a dozen years had elapsed since our last face-to-face meeting, she hadn’t backed down in the least.

Being a raiser of questions and a broker for change often is exhausting, especially if one swims against the tide of prevailing opinion. But Riffat

sees an enormous need for her work, particularly her outreach to women in cultures committed to the sort of “Islamization” of civic and cultural life seen in such Muslim nations as Pakistan. Such countries sometimes have retreated from modernity into an interpretation of Muslim identity that is dangerous, even deadly, for their female citizens. In one of her many articles, Riffat writes:

While ‘modernization’ is considered highly desirable, ‘Westernization’ is considered equally undesirable. What is of importance to note, here, is that an emancipated Muslim woman is seen by many Muslims as a symbol not of ‘modernization’ but of ‘Westernization.’ This is so because she appears to be in violation of what traditional societies consider to be a necessary barrier between ‘private space’ where women belong and ‘public space’ which belongs to men.

Riffat began studying theological issues related to Islam and women in 1974, but it was almost 10 years later when her career as an activist began. She says she recognized growing dangers to women’s freedom after spending almost two years in Pakistan in the early 1980s. A flood of “anti-women” literature swept through Pakistan after it enacted the Hadud Ordinance in 1979, she says.

According to that law, women’s testimony was declared inadmissible in “Hadd” crimes, those



specifically mentioned in the Qu'ran. Hadd crimes include rape. The Hadud Ordinance stunned some Pakistani women because it was designed to help "Islamicize" the nation's legal system, bringing it into conformity with prevailing conservative understandings of Muslim tradition and scripture.

"It soon became apparent that forces of religious conservatism were determined to cut women down to one-half or less of men, and that this attitude stemmed from a deep-rooted desire to keep women in their place, which means secondary, subordinate and inferior to men," Riffat says.

"Reflecting upon the scene I witnessed with increasing alarm and anxiety, I asked myself how it was possible for manifestly unjust laws to be implemented in a country which professed a passionate commitment to both Islam and modernity.

"The answer to my question was so obvious that I was startled that it had not struck me before. Pakistani society (or other Muslim societies) could enact or accept laws which specified that women were less than men in fundamental ways because Muslims, in general, consider it a self-evident truth that women are not equal to men."

The terrorist attacks of Sept. 11, 2001, dismayed bridge-builders like Riffat, underscoring the urgency of interfaith alliances and the necessity of distinguishing between faithful Muslims and Islamic extremists. Convincing others—from clerics and

scholars to average Christians and Jews—that Islam is more than its violent, extremist fringe looms large among Riffat’s priorities, part of what she characterizes as “the biggest challenge of my life.”

“I am painfully aware,” she tells me on the snowy winter night of our interview for this book. “I am aware of the fact that westerners in general—including many Christians and Jews who, like Muslims are ‘People of the Book’—perceive Islam as a religion spread by the sword, and Muslims as religious fanatics who are zealously committed to waging ‘Holy War’ against non-Muslims or against non-conforming Muslims.”

She sighs deeply. Her eyes take on a steely cast. This problem is one of many Riffat believes she must face. We are sitting in the comfortable but impersonal green-gold conference room of a motel off a main thoroughfare in Louisville. Its impersonality contrasts with the deeply personal nature of our conversation.

Both of us are tired. It is after 9 p.m. on a Friday. I had attended a faculty conference in Columbia before flying several hundred miles to Louisville to meet with Riffat. When I arrived minutes earlier, delayed by late planes and bad weather, I apologized for my tardiness. I felt disorganized, out-of-balance and not at my best as an interviewer. But I was determined to make this pilgrimage for this particular conversation. It was the last formal interview for this set of

stories, but one of hundreds of journeys I've taken as a journalist. I was tired, but that doesn't really matter. What matters is the story. What mattered was getting Riffat's story.

So I ask my questions and force myself to focus on her answers. She speaks at an even gait, but articulates complex opinions on a spectrum of ideas. I have trouble keeping up and continue to take written notes, all the while suspecting my notes may prove useless and that I'll rely heavily on my tape recorder. Riffat is an engaging conversationalist. Her body language speaks volumes. She stretches slightly, grimaces, and then squares her shoulders as she tells me why she works as hard as she does.

"Islam defines itself as a religion of balance, of moderation, of the middle way," she stresses. "This idea of the middle way you find in most religions, in Buddhism, in Hinduism. You find it in Plato. The right way is the middle way, representing the idea of balance. Of course when you talk about the middle way, the middle way is not a straight and narrow line. By the middle way, I mean these are people who are not extremists. People who want to have human rights."

Her lively intellect complements her warm and gracious presence. Before she will speak, she quizzes me about my book, my goals, and my decision to teach full-time rather than continue working as a journalist. *I matter, my work matters, we all matter*, her

attitude towards me indicates. It helps me relax a little. I begin to feel more as though I am speaking to a friend. I recognize quickly that she is treating me as a fellow searcher and not as a disciple. Then and now, I consider it a great compliment.

Born in Lahore, Pakistan, and educated at an Anglican missionary high school, Riffat still speaks with a British lilt, despite teaching for almost three decades at the University of Louisville and at a nearby seminary. Her grandfather was a gifted poet. Her parents were polar opposites; their third daughter discovered early on she must go her own way, using the life of the mind to escape.

“My mother and my father were diametrically opposed to each other in every sense of the word,” Riffat says, describing her mother as a radical feminist who was artistic and creative and her father as very conservative and traditional.

“I was the third daughter and I was the one that was most single-minded. I was very much a loner. When I was 12, my second sister was married. I thought, *Four years later and it's going to be me*. I went from being a very quiet child to being very belligerent.”

At age 17, she left Pakistan to study in England, eventually earning her doctorate. As a young woman, she wrote poetry and was very idealistic. “I always had a very strong connection to God. I believed not only that there was God, but that God had a purpose for my life.”

Though her childhood was scarred by her parents' disagreements, Riffat believes she got the will to fight for what she believes in from her mother, even though the two were never close and found communication difficult.

"When I look at my life...the bright passage was that I was very, very successful academically. On the other hand was the emotional aspect: always living under clanging swords. I was very, very hurt. I kind of took refuge in writing poetry. I created a dream world."

Riffat sits with her arms crossed. A thoughtful look comes into her eyes as she remembers the 1970s, when her academic prowess and her deep need to make a difference in others' lives gave her a sense of true purpose. "When I started working on women by then I had been through a lot of trauma, I began to feel that that was what I was supposed to do.

"I have always been, as a human being, extremely intense, very serious. I've always had this outlook that life is a very serious thing. People tell to me relax and have fun. It's not that I don't have fun. I love my work. I just think there is so much that has to be done."

Her ongoing work includes organizing international networks to assist women, helping people of both sexes win human rights and forging alliance for interfaith dialogue.

She led her university's successful bid for federal

funds that brought Muslim scholars to the United States. She continues that project and others that put people who are different in places and circumstances in which they might learn from one another. "I think that dialogue is actually a discipline that you have to learn. Everybody wants to do dialogue, but very few people understand what dialogue is.

"My thesis is that the only way you can fight extremes is from the middle," she says, explaining that too many religious schools in largely Muslim countries cater only to men and to extremist movements. Then, she talks about the hundreds of Muslim women she met at international meetings on human rights in Cairo and later in Beijing. Most of the women at those sessions insisted Islam treated them fairly, "like princesses," Riffat says.

Her frustration is obvious. Those women had no idea that extremists have co-opted Islam in some Muslim countries, misunderstanding and misinterpreting Qu'ranic teachings and the Prophet's message. U.S. leaders may repeatedly declare war on terror, but Riffat believes the real issues undermining world opinion of Islam and undermining Muslim women must be tackled from within. "They cannot be reformed by the Americans sitting in Washington," she declares.

"One reason I have been on this mission for so long now is that I see the vast majority of Muslim women—there are maybe 500 or 600 million Muslim

women, the vast majority of these have three characteristics," she says. "They are poor. They are illiterate and they live in a village.

"If I want to access one of these women, somewhere, wherever, I can say to her: *My sister, I bring you liberation in the name of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights*. Then, I can read the whole document to her. It's a great document. It doesn't mean anything to her. It's irrelevant to her frame of reference, right?

"But if I ask her, *Do you believe in God?* Of course she does, very strongly. If I ask, *do you think God is merciful and just?* She believes that, also. She believes that even though her own life is so full of injustice; she still thinks God is just and merciful. But then I ask, *If God is merciful and just, do you think it would be the will of God that you should have no rights, that you should be beaten and brutalized and have no opportunity to study?*"

Riffat's brown eyes flash. I'm hooked, waiting with anticipation for her next point. I imagine how stimulating it must be to take one of her courses.

"Very, very elementary theology," Riffat explains, continuing her imaginary conversation with a Muslim woman on the other side of the world. "It's unintentional, but this point makes sense to her. She begins to say that this religion which has always been her sustaining factor may also be a constraining factor, limiting.

"It works every time. In order to reveal to people

and make people aware that they have the power to change their lives, you have to connect to their belief systems. It's not something you have to impose on them from outside."

So she continues to talk to Muslim women. And she continues to answer the hundreds of questions coming her way. When people ask her why so many Islamic leaders condemn the West in general and the United States in particular, Riffat tries to answer. Then she turns the query on the question-raisers, urging them to study Islam, work for global peace, engage in interfaith understanding and connect across cultural divides. She stresses finding the middle way between uncritical acceptance and vicious condemnation.

Long before she found herself in frequent demand as a speaker and interpreter for her faith, Riffat pioneered Muslim feminism, spearheaded interfaith outreach and founded international organizations to improve the plight of Muslims who are poor, uneducated or persecuted.

A loner who spends as much if not more time with books than people, Riffat nevertheless has no intention of shrinking from public service. Despite developing painful arthritis that makes simply getting dressed in the morning a lengthy process, she travels often, to academic conferences, public forums and international meetings. Her experiences abroad and in the United States forged her will to keep working for change, even though she had taught, researched,



written and published so extensively that she had already earned many of the accolades sought by many academicians for their entire careers.

A new urgency, some anger and a growing intuitive concern began to pervade her work. Power-grabbing institutions, manmade governments and shrill-voiced demagogues ignited her activism. Islam, her faith, and the other faiths of the world were so much more than might be surmised from the morning headlines. Riffat returned to the Qu'ran, to spiritual practice and hours of private thinking to galvanize her activism. Like spiritual reformers through the ages, she continues to dwell in the present but works always with a better future in her mind's eye.

All her life, she says, she has viewed simply being alive as a journey. "You take certain passages in life and they lead you to other places. I spent so many years of my life wrapped up in theological, intellectual stuff. My effort (now) is to translate that into practical projects for the development of women. Then again, women are a part of society. You cannot separate women from society. I want to work for the development of women since I see this as pivotal to social transformation. I think it has been a progression for me from looking at the issues of women and human rights to looking at society as a whole.

"I probably would not have gotten there so quickly had I not gone to those two world conferences in 1994 and 1995. I started to see the larger picture. I

am still very concerned about issues of women and human rights. The issue of violence, for example. In dealing with the issue of violence, my approach is, it's not enough to take care of victims of violence. We have to stop violence before it happens. In order to bring about social transformation at the ground level, you have to change the mindset."

That means seeking a cultural transformation within not only the Islamic world but also the world at large. How rapidly the transformation occurs shall depend in large measure on Muslims, especially Muslims who have lived in both the West and in the Muslim world. "We have to play a leadership role in this now," Riffat says. "The more I think about it, logically, that is the only way to achieve what needs to be done. The people at the (U.S.) State Department don't know what to do. Consulates are very limited."

"The religious extremists had hijacked the discourse on Islam and the anti-religious extremists had hijacked the discourse on human rights. The people in the middle, the silent majority, had no discourse," she says of her intentional effort. "I started this one person effort. I started speaking about it and writing about it. We wanted to start a middle way. The people in the middle have become disempowered. They have become silent."

Riffat would give them voice. She recognizes the necessity of dialogue. Being a Muslim at this point in

world history means not being overcome by hatred, anger or impatience in encounters with people who view Muslims as the enemy. Engage such people in dialogue, she urges. "Being a Muslim today means paying serious heed to the teaching that God, universal creator and sustainer, who cares for all and sends guidance to all, has decreed diversity for a reason."

There have been places, even periods, in which Christians, Muslims and Jews have lived in peace. Islam has often been at odds with the West since its inception, although it shares Abraham with Judaism and Christianity. Whereas many people suspect religion causes this discord, I think the distrust and unease between Islam and the West has as much to do with cultural disparities and religious interpretations as with actual religious beliefs.

Especially in its purest form, Islam is a religion of peace, of justice and of compassion. And the story of Muhammad's call to preach is one imbued with the same sort of disillusionment, sorrow, repentance, searching and renewal that fill books outlining the lives of Jewish prophets and Christian saints. Moreover, Muslims believe that Muhammad, revered as God's final prophet, was given the words of the Qu'ran as a continuation of the Divine's message to humankind.

As religion scholar Huston Smith has noted, "In the Qu'ran, God speaks in the first person. Allah describes himself and makes known his laws. The

Muslim is therefore inclined to consider each individual sentence of the Holy God as a separate revelation and to experience the words themselves, even their sounds, as a means of grace.”

In this context, the stories of Muhammad’s life and of the development of Islam stream into a compelling religious tale of call and promise, surrender and faith. God is addressed as *Allah* in the Qu’ran. The word is formed in the combination of the definite article al, or the, with *Ilah*, the Arabic word for God. *Allah* means *the God*.

The creation story unveils in the Qu’ran as in the Bible up until the life of Abraham. When Abraham’s wife, Sarah, at first could not have a son, Abraham, Muslims believe, took a second wife, Hagar. She bore him a son named Ishmael. Later, after Sarah conceived and gave birth to a son named Isaac, Ishmael and Hagar were banished from the tribe. Ishmael went to the place where Mecca was to rise.

Muhammad enters the story in the sixth century. Prophets of God, whom Muslims believe were authentic prophets, preceded Muhammad. But he was the last, known among Muslims as the “Seal of the Prophets.”

The God I know—or struggle to know, for often I am “seeing through a glass darkly” in the area of faith—is beyond the boundaries of one faith. That God is neither male nor female, neither Christian, Jew nor Muslim. Not American, Iraqi, Syrian or

Israeli. Not Caucasian, African-American, Hispanic nor Asian. God is far beyond how we might describe him or her. I believe that's been my understanding since childhood, but I often hesitated to articulate my sentiments. Quietly, sometimes in my professional life and other times in a personal way, I looked for like-minded seekers. Their religion mattered much less than their orientation. In Riffat Hassan, I found a kindred soul.

Like P.K., like Arunima, like Phoebe, like every woman who has led me more deeply into the theology of my own heart, Riffat knows the same God I know. Especially as a scholar. Especially as a woman. Yet she found her sense of belonging not in Islam but elsewhere.

"It was another setting," she says, "that of inter-religious dialogue among believers in the one God, that I found the community of faith I had sought all my life. In this community of faith I have found others who, like myself, are committed to creating a new world in which human beings will not brutalize or victimize one another in the name of God, but will affirm, through word and action, that as God is just and loving so human beings must treat each other with justice and love regardless of sex, creed or color."

My first interview with Riffat was in 1992, after the Gulf War. I was trying to better understand Islam. I wanted to know Muslims better. And I wanted to

develop a true sense of what it was like to be Muslim and live in the United States during the Gulf War. Back then, I had friends and neighbors who suffered from stereotypes. Nationality and religion didn't matter. If they had dark eyes and dark hair, they had endured stares, slurs and ostracism in shopping malls and grocery stores because their fellow citizens feared they were terrorists.

In my first meeting with Riffat, we discussed everything from the difficulties of being female in a succession of underdeveloped nations to the reshaping of Muslim identity over the centuries. She was visiting Houston, where I was a newspaper reporter, to talk about the Qu'ranic perspective on human rights and related issues. Her visit was part of the interfaith series "God-Talk: New Religious Thought for Critical Peace and Justice Issues of the 1990s."

I had as much trouble keeping up with Riffat in that first interview as I do now. Riffat would quote the Qu'ran one moment, a European scholar the next. To explain a point, she would skim entire eras, jumping from the 20th-century Arab-Israeli conflict backward to the seventh century, then jolting forward to the European Renaissance.

Some Islamic tensions can be traced to the historical circumstances of early Islam, she said. Islam's initial success centuries ago forged a particular Muslim self-image. It developed as a religion that "gives you power in this world and the next," she said.

But the early Muslims' understanding of power was very different from that currently found in some parts of the Islamic world. Paraphrasing scholar Wilfred Cantwell Smith, Riffat says, "Original Muslims believed in God; modern Muslims believe in Islam."

In a personal sense, Riffat says "being a Muslim today means—and always means—being on a journey, both external and internal, towards attaining a state of peace which is the goal of Islam. However, peace is not merely the absence of conflict, even as health is not merely the absence of sickness. According to the perspective of the Qu'ran, peace is a positive state of safety or security in which one is free from anxiety and fear. It comes into being when human beings honoring the divine imperative to live justly, learn to be just to themselves and to others."

And perhaps, also learn just to be themselves. For the first time ever as a journalist, I was completely myself as I encountered a group of Muslim girls in May 2005 on a journey to the Hashemite kingdom of Jordan.

Following a tip he'd found in a guidebook, my photographer husband wanted to take photos of a religious shrine, the Cave of the Seven Sleepers. Located on the outskirts of Jordan's capital city, Amman, the cave sits at the base of the construction site for a new mosque. While not widely known, the shrine is mentioned in some guidebooks and draws

both Christians and Muslim visitors.

As my husband took pictures, I read brief historical markers about the cave. I was one of a handful of visitors inside. Then all of a sudden, a gaggle of Muslim schoolgirls led by their teacher scrambled into the cave's small space. Laughter, oohs and aahs and Arabic chatter took over. The teacher spoke a little English and my husband soon began chatting with her. But I hung back, just watching. Soon the teacher introduced herself to me and to the children who clustered around me, eager to meet this unknown American woman accompanying the man clicking away with his camera.

Remaining a bystander proved impossible. The next thing I knew, the children wanted to sing to me. So they did. Then each wanted to greet me. Some of their curiosity was real and some was showing off, like the doe-eyed troublemaker who shook my hand at least six times, repeating, "Thank you very much. Thank you very much." When I tried to draw back, nodding and smiling and repeating the one or two Arabic phrases I could recall, the youngsters—all middle school aged girls—stymied my retreat.

"Now, they want you to sing to them!" the teacher declared.

I almost froze. And then, I thought: *Why not?* And the next thing I knew I was singing "Getting to Know You," from the *The King and I*, the musical starring Yul Brenner and Deborah Kerr. I'm sure I looked



(and sounded) as out-of-place as I felt at first. But, then and now, I don't care. Because I let down my guard. And, I believe, because I took a risk, I had an interreligious, cross cultural experience. I will always treasure that experience.

And it didn't require an international treaty, a war against terrorism or a council of theological scholars. The children didn't see me as the Other, a stranger, and so I was able to be me.

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