

# Chapman voice **Essraa Nawar**: Does luck explain my life as a Muslim?



ESSRAA NAWAR

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About a year ago, I published my first article – feeling welcomed and empowered – that chronicled my journey as a Muslim woman living in the United States.

The responses have been positive, supportive and encouraging so far.

From “this is inspiring” to “you go girl,” I felt really loved, empowered and excited that I am making a positive change for Muslim women (especially the ones who decide to wear the hijab and take the challenge of standing out in public) and presenting a change to the typical stories we see about negative experiences of Muslim women in the United States and around the world and the stories of oppressed Muslim women who have no control over their lives.

Ultimately, you would think I should be grateful. Of course, I am. But I have always been challenged by the comments I get over and over from my close friends, acquaintances and colleagues in my profession across the nation when I discuss my article.

Over and over, they keep telling me that I have to understand that my situation is different: Since most of my experiences and encounters have been around the East and West coasts of the United States, they have mostly been around academic institutions/higher education facilities and highly educated/well-traveled Americans.

In addition to that, I am – surprisingly to many non-Muslim Americans – an approachable hijabi, highly educated (with a bachelor's and master's degree and working on my second master's) and speak English so well (you should be shocked).

I also come from an upper-middle-class family. My parents afforded some travel, an international school, and some experiences that shaped my personality and ability to adapt to other cultures quickly and graciously.

While I see where all of these opinions come from, I go back and think deeply – I could not help to fight them at least in my head for almost the past year.

Of course I have been lucky and blessed that my life turned out the way it is, but I also know that luck comes to those who look after it and when preparation meets opportunity.

Let me start back to when I first moved to the United States 12 years ago and take it step by step again and ask myself and all of you some questions.

Was I just lucky when my landlord back in Fairfax, Va., (a white Christian woman) was very sweet, thoughtful and treated me as her daughter? Was I just lucky when my neighbors in Annandale, Va., (a mix of races) acted like heroes trying to save me and my family when we had a fire at our apartment?

Was I just lucky when I had the best nurses and doctors serve me when I delivered my babies – not once, but twice – in a Virginia hospital? Was it just luck when I had my best conversations during my train rides to work every day to Washington, D.C.? Is it just luck when people smile back when I smile to them in the streets or the stores?

Am I just lucky to have my friends here in California who take care of my kids when I need help (driving, babysitting, etc.)? Am I just lucky that my babysitter (a white Christian lady) is the best babysitter I have ever had and is one of the only sitters I would trust in my house?

Am I just lucky when my neighbors (mostly white – and same-gender partners next door, too) are very nice to us, take care of our house when we are away on trips, offer to help fix things when we are in need and pass along their kids' possessions when they are not needed any more?

Was I just lucky when my other neighbor and the mom of my son's friend and teammate talked me into carpooling our sons to save time and energy? She even offered to take my son with her for some of the competitions when my husband was out of town and I had to work.

She was also super thoughtful when she had to go to church and asked if it was OK if she (a white Catholic woman) took my son with her (of course I said yes).

Was I just lucky when my nurse friend offered to give my visiting father-in-law his vitamin B shots every week to save us the trouble of finding a way to do it? Was it just luck when I received a national grant from the American Library Association and the benefactors not only wanted to meet with me and know about my story, but also included me in a VIP dinner with Paula Poundstone?

Is it just luck when I consider a colleague of mine and a person that I have the honor of calling one of my closest friends (a white Catholic man) a mentor?

Am I just lucky for having received two invitations (\$4,000 worth) to a gala dinner as a thank-you for a job well done? Am I just lucky when my boss (and mentor) gives me the employee of the year award because of my hard work and nominates me for the president's award the same year?

Or am I just lucky to be able to consider a friend (who happens to be Jewish) a mentor and a model on how to raise my children? Is it just luck when I get invited to Christmas parties, weddings and anniversaries because these people are my friends and not concerned with the way I dress and how I pray?

I can keep going on and on, but I think this is enough. Now, my question is: Are all these people fake? Are they all hypocrites who just know how to act really well? Or are we as Eboo Patel describes: moving toward "a religiously diverse democracy"? (Patel was appointed by President Barack Obama to serve as a member of his Advisory Council on Faith-Based Neighborhood Partnership. He is also the president and founder of the Interfaith Youth Core).

I know that racism exists – I am not going to argue over that. But I feel the same way Robert Wald Sussman describes in his recent article in Newsweek: "It seems that the belief in human races, carrying along with it the prejudice and hatred of 'racism,' is so embedded in our culture and has been an integral part of our worldview for so long that many of us assume that it just must be true."

I am afraid to say that I feel the same way. I do not know the ins and outs of American history and how the issue of racism affected the nation, but what I know for sure is that we can move on and follow our dreams. We have laws, we have rights, and we can take racism out of our heads and fight against it.

As a kid, my mum (a very modest Muslim woman) used to quote a very important verse from the Quran whenever I had questions about people of different faiths: "Unto you your religion, and unto me my religion" (Quran, 109:6). According to Qazi Abdul Qadeer Khamosh, "this verse clearly forbids Muslims to interfere in other peoples religious affairs and affirms the freedom to live according to one's faith."

When I enter a place, everyone starts looking at me. I totally ignore it, and in my head I say, “Maybe they are checking me out!” or “They are just curious,” or “They do not know or have not met a Muslim woman before.”

Thus, I start to see this as an opportunity to start a relationship and erase a misconception. This is when I see barriers start dissolving and the start of the positive experience begins. It starts with you, and I do my share.

I host gatherings at my house for people from different religions, ethnicities and backgrounds, and I plan to do more in an effort to work on these barriers and hopefully dissolve them all. I am also not afraid to be part of the conversation no matter what the topic or the place is. It is a matter of taking a step forward.

Believe me when I tell you that this does not only happen in a store, work or a mall – it also happens in Muslim communities (and I am sure in other communities, too).

As a Muslim woman, you can be judged by the way you dress (too liberal versus too strict; hijabi or not; brand name headscarf or not; and so on and so forth). Thus, I try to rise above the drama and just focus my energy on people and relationships.

As I continue pursuing the journey of life, I have to say that nice people are nice people no matter where they come from, what their religion or spiritual practice is, or their race. What matters are your values, ethics and empathy to the people around you.

We are all just people who happen to orient ourselves differently around many aspects of life. This orientation is affected by the place you were born, the experiences you have been through, and your family and parents’ history – nobody really gets to choose these.

So please join me and others across the globe in our efforts to reunite our faith in humanity so that we all feel welcomed and empowered.

Are you in?

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