Too Everything to Fit In

Category: New Voices
written by Zainab Jimoh | November 7, 2023

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"Our next one is a new patient who's here to establish care," said my family-medicine preceptor, perusing the patient's chart.

Great, I thought. *Seems like this visit will be pretty simple.*

My preceptor entered the exam room, and I nonchalantly followed. Then I locked eyes with the patient—a short, middle-aged woman with bronzed skin and a teal-colored headwrap: a hijab.

My feet felt cemented to the floor, and my heart began to race. I can't quite describe my feelings—surprised, shocked, speechless, stunned? I'm not sure. It was just a *good* feeling.

Suddenly remembering that I was wearing my white coat, I tucked my overwhelming emotions into my pocket and snapped out of my haze.

Fiddling with *my* hijab, I said, "Hello, my name is Zainab" (a name of Arabic origin). "I'm a first-year medical student."

For a split second the woman's face lit up with a smile that I didn't know I needed to see. Then she quickly looked down at her feet, as if she too remembered the setting and was tucking away her own feelings of instant connection.

This was my first encounter with a patient who looked like me, and I wouldn't be surprised if this were Noor's first encounter with a health professional who looked like her.

I began wearing a hijab in sixth grade. Each morning I made a very important decision: *What color hijab do I wear today? Red, royal blue, floral, green?* I'd meticulously pick out the perfect one, making sure that it was color-coordinated with my shoes or my bracelets. Yet, every day, as soon as I got to school, I felt the loud, creative personality I yearned to express slip under my hijab, covered up along with my hair.

I recall the day in sixth grade when someone asked me, "Where were you on 9/11?"

I turned around to see two white male students snickering to themselves and avoiding my eyes. I felt targeted because I was different, a very confusing experience for an eleven-year-old. I couldn't help but wonder why my parents would send me to school wearing a hijab, when they knew of the hatred often directed towards Muslims.

After that experience, I was tempted to rip my hijab to pieces—not because I was embarrassed about my faith but because I wasn't used to such comments. Thereafter, I isolated myself at school, hoping to be invisible despite sticking out like a sore thumb.

The struggle to display the confidence I so desperately craved sparked an intense desire to run away. The itch to leave my neighborhood in Houston for a new world where I could unapologetically be myself grew so intense that I scratched at it incessantly.

Every day, from middle school through high school, I worked quietly yet diligently towards being a well-rounded student. I was determined to give my future self the opportunity to finally become the person I wanted to be—an artistic, self-assertive, warmhearted woman, with a passion for health equity. I no longer wanted to be "the quiet girl who wears that *thing* on her head." I didn't rest until this itch was finally soothed: In my senior year, I received a full scholarship to a school more than a thousand miles away, Johns Hopkins University.

Envisioning my life far from where I'd grown up, I thought, *I can finally paint the picture of myself that I want the world to see.*

With this renewed hope, I shed the social anxiety that had kept me mute for years—and with it, my hijab. I still believed in my faith, but without the hijab, I finally freed my inner self.

Or so I thought.

After starting my first year at Johns Hopkins, a primarily white institution, I felt the confidence I'd been so eager to express dissipating. Without my hijab, I realized, I was now just too Black to fit in.

Every encounter steeped in microaggression hit me like a bullet.

“You must be excited,” someone told me. “They’re serving fried chicken in the cafeteria today.”

Another time, I was called “aggressive” by a professor whom I’d asked for a grade recalculation after noticing a mistake they’d made. (Meanwhile, I’d heard this same professor tell a white classmate who’d made a similar request, “Good catch! I’m so sorry for my mistake.”)

On graduation day, as I stood in my cap and gown, I felt as if I were standing in a pool of invisible blood. The joy I felt at receiving my bachelor’s degree with honors was suppressed by my relief at finally being free to leave this environment.

I’d thought that removing my hijab would be the answer to my prayers. I just wanted to be me *and* to fit in. My experiences at Johns Hopkins felt like God’s way of showing me that those two aims were mutually exclusive. With so few people like me in medicine—only 5.7 percent of physicians in the US are Black, and less than 3 percent are Black women—how could I ever be me *and* fit in?

My experience inspired a personal spiritual journey, and a renewed love of self. I’ve resumed meticulously choosing the perfect hijab each morning, with a confidence that’s no longer hidden along with my hair.

Today, I am the only Black Muslim student in my medical school. The only Black, Muslim female student. The only Black, Nigerian-American, Muslim female student. The only Black, Nigerian-American, Muslim female student wearing the hijab. I can now accept my truth: I’m too *everything* to fit in.

But I can still be me.

The instant mutual connection I felt with Noor, a patient who resembled me, opened my eyes to a role I hadn’t envisioned for myself until now.

As a Black Muslim, I represent a “double minority” status, and I experience a unique interplay between my religious and racial identities. The research shows that being Black *or* Muslim increases the incidence of discrimination, compared with that suffered by other racial and religious groups. I know from personal experience that discrimination can affect mental health, and that is just one of many unique health concerns faced by patients who look like me.

By unapologetically showing up as my whole self, I’m creating a space for other Black Muslim patients, especially those wearing the hijab, to feel seen. I know now that, as a future physician, my role is more than simply bringing more diversity to medicine. I can help patients find comfort, using my understanding of the ways in which their unique identity impacts their mental and physical health.

As I left the clinic that day, I felt empowered by my encounter with Noor. Remembering her smile and the look in her eyes when we met, I reflected, *Sometimes standing out for the right reasons is far better than fitting in.*