

As I stepped away from the microphone, my head reflexively turned to meet my mother, who accompanies me every time I leave my house. She sat to the far left, away from the crowd. Her eyebrows knitted together, but her face was blank. I saw her lips twitch. She didn't clap for me. She didn't smile. Before she could even say it, my heart beat faster. And then: "Home," she mouthed. The little sense of freedom I felt on stage evaporated. I smiled for both us when bowing in front of the audience.

Though, just like my parents, I was born in Pakistan, I don't fall easily in step with their beliefs. For my parents, faith is closely intertwined with culture, community, and respectability. It is about what the world thinks, rather than how I feel. My parents question whether my extracurricular choices are Islamic enough or whether they will help to advance me into a financially stable career path. When I call my mother out on her sexist remarks, she accuses me of being "jealous towards your brother." They tell me not to discuss my politics, because I'll never find a nice Muslim man with my big mouth.

The irony of their worries, though, is that growing up as a Pakistani-American hybrid forced me to develop a more nuanced and personal relationship with my Islam than I sometimes think they have. I never felt fully part of the Pakistani community, and instead of absorbing religion through osmosis, I pored over everything from online resources—never a wise choice—to traditionalist sheikhs. I have relentlessly questioned my faith. I adopted an Islam that embraces social justice and equality, with what I think is a purer relationship to the scriptures. Unlike my mom, I even put on the hijab.

As I struggled to define my religion, my still-forming values brought me to social justice work. I really started with a South Asian grassroots activist group in Jackson Heights, Queens through a summer internship. I started to heavily immerse my time in standing up for the #BlackLivesMatter movement, immigration reform, workers' rights, student justice, and LGBTQIA+ rights. I became an outspoken activist about how, for some of my Muslim sisters and I, the hijab is a feminist statement. Among this, I joined a monthly writing group where I worked with a mentor to become more honest and vulnerable in my writing.

I know my journey of figuring out my faith—my Islam—isn't over. I don't begrudge my parents of their culturally imbued religion, but I constantly struggle to shake off that upbringing as I fight to become the woman I aspire to be: unapologetic. Whenever I am on public transit, I become anxious, riddled with my mom's worries about a young woman riding alone. When my desires and ambitions clash with what is expected, I involuntarily worry about disappointing my family and community before I think about what's right for myself.

Throughout all of these struggles, I find myself returning to my faith. I find comfort in seeing that Islam has advocated for unalienable human rights throughout history. My faith also teaches forgiveness and understanding, and I try to apply both to my parents, no matter how much our views diverge.

Yet now, as I am on the cusp of adulthood, I am excited to spend the next four years at a college where I can grow and continue to question my views and beliefs. On campus, I hope to surround myself with friends of differing views who pursue creative and funky ideas—that is where I know I will thrive. Many days, I'm certain that I will work towards my dream of becoming a journalist, but I wake up every day knowing that I will pursue my greatest dream of becoming fearless. And, four years later, I'll pack that knowledge in my bags as I step onto the stage of life.