

Cynthia Sinai

My name is Cynthia Sinai. I was born in 1989 to immigrant Lebanese parents, who'd come to the United States three years before I was born, and while living in New York converted to the LDS faith. I lived in New York till I was thirteen. My family moved after the September 11th attacks. My family wasn't Muslim, but they still felt the effects of the anti-Muslim sentiment, which was why they moved from New York to Salt Lake City. They hoped that in Salt Lake, amongst other Mormons, our family would feel more accepted.

That didn't happen.

I've been living in Salt Lake City since. My parents spoke with an accent, and had kept some traditions from when they were Muslim. Mother still wore a headscarf in public, though the rest of her clothing could be considered American. But wearing the headscarf attracted attention, especially after 9/11. When my family was getting on the plane to fly to Salt Lake City, I remembered the looks we would get from the other potential passengers as we passed through security. Undoubtedly, they noticed mother's scarf. The looks wouldn't cease in Salt Lake City, of course. It reached the point of hating to be in public with mother, because we'd be viewed with such suspicion.

Everyone thought we were Muslim. In church, we were viewed as recent converts, and the other members were seemingly teaching us the basics of the LDS faith, when I had been LDS for all my life, my parents longer. Of course, mother didn't wear the scarf in church, since it was out of code. But merely the color of our skin and my parents accent, not to mention mother's style of dress outside of church, was enough to get the other church members to see us as new converts who just left an "evil" faith, and they'd tell us how happy they were that we left Islam, when I myself never had left Islam. I've been Mormon all my life! In church, we simply didn't feel welcome

at all for a long time. We felt like outsiders.

We felt the anti-Islamic sentiment, even though we weren't Muslims. I remember one night my parents found graffiti on our house. They hid it from us then, but they told me later in life what it was. It read, "Terrorists go to hell!", and it was right across the front of the house. The police never tracked down who it was who did it. When in school, I felt as if jokes about terrorism were being directed at me, just by the way the other kids would say it. They would ask me what it was like to be Muslim or to grow up in the Middle East. In geography, the teacher made an assignment where the students had to interview an immigrant, and one girl wanted to interview me. Furious, I said, "I am not an immigrant! I was born here!" and stormed off. I didn't have a lot of friends in school. I wasn't the most attractive girl, so few boys showed any interest in me.

I received surprised looks when I came into Seminary in high school, which really put me off the rest of the day. I never really loved school before college. Looking back, I don't feel that I did the best I could have. I did the assignments and was a B average, but I had such a sour attitude toward school that I wasn't punctual to class, even just not coming to class every once in a while. I can't think of a quarter where I didn't have to attend some form of attendance school.

Mother wore her headscarf because she felt that it was the decent thing to do. She tried to encourage me to wear a headscarf as well. I strongly opposed the idea. I felt the last thing I needed was dressing like a Muslim, since I already looked like one. I began to really hate Islam and the Middle East. I tried fitting in. When people would say negative things about Islam, I tried to make my approval of the comment clear. My self-esteem was quite low. I didn't like looking in the mirror because at times, especially when news from the Middle East or Islam would emerge, I'd look in the mirror and see a terrorist looking back. Since my skin wasn't too dark, I tried wearing more makeup to look whiter. I desperately wished that I had been born a white Mormon.

I've enjoyed college more than high school. I go to Brigham Young University, and am engaged to a fine young man, a white, who I love very much. I don't see my parents often. While I don't feel as vehemently angry as I did in middle school and high school, I still haven't changed my attitudes all that much. All I hope is that my

children don't experience what I have.

Cynthia, the treatment you've endured is unfair (though I'm sure you don't need me to tell you that). I understand how it doesn't seem to make sense that you would be feeling the effects of what has been termed "Islamophobia", since you are a Mormon and your family has been Mormon for almost as long as they've lived in the United States, and that you were born a Mormon and are not Muslim at all. But what you are experiencing isn't unusual, unfortunately. Quite often, it doesn't matter whether what others say about you is true or not. But as Allan Johnson explained in "The Trouble We're In", privilege in this society isn't based on who you actually are, but rather on how others perceive you to be. The people you've met saw the color of your skin, the bone structure of your face, and placed you into an oppressed minority: Muslim. This isn't right at all, and needs to be changed. But until we change it, that's the way it works, and that's the reason why you experience what actual Muslims in this country endure. It's not your fault. You have been made the "other" in society, even though it's not entirely based on reality, and now experience what the "other" does, which is miserable.

Considering what you've been through and your age, it only makes sense that you've started to hate your cultural heritage and your ethnicity. Many have been through this. I read an essay by a Tongan woman named Tupou Pau'u, called "My Life in Four Cultures". When she lived in New Zealand and Australia, she was demeaned for being Tongan. It was constant and brutal. Eventually, she came to hate her culture and her ethnicity, too. She would look in the mirror and hate the person looking back. Society all around her "othered" her, so she "othered" herself. It took a trip to Tonga to eventually learn to respect her culture. It's not unusual for you to experience hatred of yourself. Since everyone around you has "othered" you, you're beginning to "other" yourself, which may be worse than the rest of society "othering" you.

You may give anything to become a member of the privileged group, to not be the "other" any more. I personally can relate. One thing you'll discover from living in Utah is that Mormons are not the minority here. They are the privileged group. I am not a member of the privileged group. My family and I are Seventh-Day

Adventists, and moved here from Idaho when I was too young to remember. In school, I learned that I was different from the rest. A mother of one of the students would look at us snobbishly, never speaking to us, and Mom said it was because we were not Mormon. There was a little girl that I had a crush on, but her mother didn't want her to play with us, and Mom said, again, that it was because we weren't Mormon. Family friends then and now would take us to Mormon events in an effort to convert us. In first grade, I had three bullies and no friends. So I distinctly remember one night when some Mormon missionaries came to our house, and our parents invited them in (not because they were interested in converting, but because they were bored and decided they'd debate with the missionaries, just for the heck of it). When they did, I ran into Mom and Dad's bedroom, where my siblings were watching TV, and excitedly told my brother, "We might become Mormon!" I really, truly hoped that we'd convert. I'd watch Mom and Dad talk to the missionaries, hoping that the missionaries would convince Mom and Dad. It wasn't because I believed in the LDS faith. I honestly didn't have a clue what it was. I only wanted to be a part of the in group, and to be a part of what the other students in school were in. It wasn't until I went to an Adventist private school that I began to appreciate my own religion. I had been "othered", and I would do anything to get un-"othered". I didn't like what I was, and wished I could change it. While I won't say that I experienced anything nearly as bad as what you've had to endure, Cynthia, I can at least relate.

However, you shouldn't "other" yourself or hate your cultural heritage. You shouldn't reject it or throw it away. That won't make your life any easier or happier, and you'll regret the decision. I read an essay called, "The Struggle to Be an All-American Girl", by Elizabeth Wong. Her mother made her learn Chinese culture while she was a child, but she hated and rejected the lessons, and completely assimilated into mainstream American culture. She became an all-American girl. And as she lamented at the end, "Sadly, I still am." Just because the society around you teaches you that your heritage is evil doesn't mean that it is. The Muslims were one of the finest civilizations in history! (Yes, I am aware of the fact that you are not Muslim, but that is your heritage). Don't reject your heritage. Learn to be proud of it! There's a lot to be proud of, and you will be a happier individual if you accept yourself. Like the poem "With a Green Scarf" by Martin Scoresu implies, you can't hide from

everything. Your personal history and who you are will always be with you, never leaving you. If you try to purge yourself of it, it will haunt you, like Elizabeth Wong experiences. There's only one way to make it positive, and that's to learn to love it.

What you've experienced is wrong. I sympathize with your anger completely. But I simply want to remind you that you're not alone, and you're not in a hopeless position, and rejecting your heritage rather than accepting it is not the best path to choose. If you want happiness, don't cave to society. You can never cave enough. Stand up to those who oppress you, and refuse to accept it! Only if you do that can you reach peace with yourself, and if you do that, eventually society will be forced to come to peace with you.