

# **My Son's World**

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On the day that my son was born, my world became his. I no longer lived for myself, but existed to raise him to be an honest and respectable man. It is my role as a parent, a duty given to me by the grace of God, to teach him right from wrong. This is no easy task; I know the failings of the human spirit in times of anger, sorrow and pain; and their power to corrupt human sensibility and distort logic and reason. I cannot eliminate these emotions from my son's life, they are as essential to his development, growth and life cycle, as is birth and death, but what I can do is to show him, and make him understand that he must engage his world and actively seek his own personal understanding of the world, beyond the fog of third-party opinions. The search for personal enlightenment will empower him and safeguard him from the corruptions of the human spirit in his darkest and most solemn moments. If I cannot change the world for every child, I can at least be an example for my own.

My life, before my son, was spent mostly in New York City, in the south Queens neighborhood of Howard Beach. Howard Beach, like most of south Queens, is divided by and separated by water, mainly Jamaica Bay and its tribu-

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tarries. These physical features create a unique situation in Howard Beach; two canals create three distinct landforms, which over time have become natural boundaries between the wealthy, middle-class and poor. I was fortunate enough to be in the middle section, Old Howard Beach. In this section lived your average person; your laborers, firemen, police officers, and school teachers. If Howard Beach was anything, it was economically diverse and if this diversity manifested itself anywhere, it happened at its subway station, Howard Beach-JFK.

The A-Train, the express line to Manhattan, took about forty-five minutes to get to the first stop “Downtown”, Broadway-Nassau. On any given morning, for thirteen miles on the A-Train, Howard Beach residents co-mingled with other New Yorkers from the previous stops in Rockaway, or later stops in Canarsie, then moving further north through Brooklyn neighborhoods like Bedford-Stuyvesant, Fort Green, and Brooklyn Heights. Each train, every morning, was filled to capacity. Breathing-room only, and when you finally reached Broadway-Nassau, where holding your breath seemed like a viable option, or so I believed on my way to college at John Jay, relief was on the way, the Chambers Street-WTC stop. There, the vast majority of these riders disembarked to begin their day in the Towers above. I took that ride, five-days a week.

By my senior year, I had become a veteran; I could breathe by panting without losing consciousness from Hoyt-Schermerhorn to Chambers St. I knew the riders, who got on at Howard Beach, and the faces of the other riders had become familiar, too. I knew where they got on and where they got off. Some mornings I would guess what they did for a living, if they had kids or even if they looked like they could use more sleep. I knew many of them had been taking this ride for years. I knew many of them would be taking this ride for many years to come. It was bearable for me because once I graduated, I was done with the A-Train, and I was heading out west to the sandy beaches of San Diego, California. I had been accepted into law school, in San Diego; a dream I had held for years that took me to a criminal justice college that consisted of embryonic attorneys, like me, firefighters and police officers. A lot of full-duty cops and firemen came back to John Jay College for their bachelor’s degree because it got them higher pay and their tuition was paid by the city. Basically, I went to the safest school in the world. I had police captains and lieutenants, fire chiefs and ladder men in my World Lit class, as well as others. They knew me and I knew them. Through the typical stresses of being students, we all became friends. After graduation in

June of 2001, they got their “bump” in pay and went back to their precincts, their ladder companies, and their engine stations. I went to California.

The school year started, “L1” as it’s endearingly referred to by law students who survive its rigors, during the second to last week in August. Typical of most law schools, I had Contracts, Torts, Civil Procedure, Criminal Law, and Legal Writing. Tough work, but I loved it. I had spent the last four years preparing for it. I was familiar with case reading from my undergraduate work, but Legal Writing was difficult for me. I worked my “tail” off on our first assignment. I went to study groups, brainstormed with friends and many late hours working on it, particularly the last night, September 10, 2001. I remember that night, mostly because of the work, but because I had foregone my daily ritual, watching baseball. Growing up in south Queens, I was pre-destined to become a New York Mets fan and I was a ravenous baseball fan. Legal Writing was the first class of the day and I was late waking up, but nothing could deter me from turning on my new laptop and finding out the score of the previous night’s baseball game. What I would see on my screen, when AOL opened, would change my life, as it would for many New Yorkers back home, who were directly affected, and many other people, of all nationalities and religions. Surprisingly, at first, I thought I was looking at a movie advertisement. How many movies had been made with disasters striking New York City, with the Statue of Liberty sticking out of the sand, or alien spaceships destroying the Empire State Building. Not until a friend from home contacted me, asking “if I could believe what happened?” Did I realize that the pictures I was looking at were real. I don’t remember my first reaction, but I do remember realizing that my friend was using the past-tense “happened.” California was three hours behind New York, everything had already happened. Contact with cell phones was almost impossible; reaching anyone through any method was difficult. Nervous tension forced me to leave my apartment, so I went to school. I went in to the Legal Writing class, almost mid-way through, it felt like I was gliding on ice. My emotions must have been written on my face, I didn’t stay, I couldn’t. I think mentally I checked out of law school that day. I would go on and finish “L1” and the summer semester that followed, but I would leave school, and California, in the fall of 2002. I was angry, not with other people, but at myself. I had abandoned my home, and in that absence, it was attacked. People had died: firemen and cops, innocent people, like the people I rode the train with. Murdered, traumatized, burned and squashed. I know I could

not have prevented it from happening, but I would be lying if I said that “what ifs” did not cross my mind a thousand and one times.

For the next seven years, I bounced from dead-end job, to unemployment, to a mediocre sales position to unemployment. Armed with nothing but my all-but-useless criminal justice B.S., I was inexperienced and without a profession. The economic downturn of 2008/2009, which had left me unemployed, actually gave me the opportunity to correct what I had let disintegrate, a chance at making my life better. I had to, my son was born July 15, 2006, I could not be a dropout to him, powerless, or unable to improve the world around him. I had to make a change in my life, empowering myself would improve my son’s life.

I am not sure what attracted me to the MCCA project’s first meeting. Not that I was not interested, typically, I am just not a “joiner.” I remember hearing Dr. Catherine Lewis and Dr. Jennifer Dickey talk about the goal of the project being to improve relations between the United States and the Islamic World. I was not sure if I would be able to do that. Not because I hated Islam or Muslims, in fact, I had wonderful experiences with Islam prior to 2001, but because I knew, at some point, I would have to talk about 9/11. I was not sure that I could or should do that.

My interest in Islam stemmed from reading the Autobiography of Malcolm X. Alex Haley, the author, penned a masterpiece and presented Islam, not as a fiery religion of hate, but having the power to convert through love and forgiveness. I was hooked. I worked with a Muslim man, during my college days, who aspired to open an Islamic bookstore in Harlem and teach the poor how to read. Our conversations, which ironically enough occurred in the cargo holds of airplanes, as we were baggage agents for Delta Airlines, also contributed to my interest in Islam, but beginning to see it as the natural “evolution” of Christianity, my own religion. In 1996, I traveled to Cairo, Egypt to see, amongst other things, the American University, where Malcolm X studied. I had a wonderful experience. After 9/11, I was foolish enough to close my eyes to this part of the world. I could not blame Islam like so many did for the attacks. However, I did question the intent of Muslims in apprehending and/or supporting the culprits of the attack. The absurdity of this distorted view stems from a desire, not for justice, but for revenge. On American TV, Muslims were not being presented as logical, sensible people who love life and all human beings. Too often, we saw Anti-American protests, flag burning, even veneration of the 9/11 attacks in Iran, a mural painted on the side of a building. It was painful, my reaction was

to withdraw. In 2009, almost eight years to the day of the attacks, and two and half years after becoming a father, the MCCA project gave me the opportunity to come out of hiding and confront this emotional issue.

The MCCA project was going to give me an opportunity to meet “face to face” with Muslims. I needed that, if for no other reason than to re-enforce what I had learned a decade before, Islam was not a religion of hate. Nor does it condone the actions of extremists. The focus of our MCCA project would be Islam in the American South. To be 100% truthful, not being Southern; I was more interested in how 9/11 affected the lives of Islamic-Americans. What I learned, meeting with Islamic-Americans, was that they were not “outsiders” when it came to 9/11, they were very much a part of us, who in their own way were dealing with their own, individual and familial, painful experiences. As terrible as it sounds, pain was acting as centripetal force, bringing us together. Had it not been for the dialogue that was created by the MCCA project, my “eyes” would still be closed, I would never have seen the connection.

In the late fall of 2009, I was selected to be a member of the Kennesaw State University delegation to Casablanca, Morocco at Ben M'sik University. I felt very fortunate to be given the opportunity. I knew that it was going to empower me on an individual level, to be part of, if nothing less, dialogue between Muslims and Americans. What I realized immediately in Casablanca, and something I desperately needed to correct, was that I had created a psychological wall that was obstructing my view of the world. I was looking at the “forest” when I needed to be looking at the “trees.” This trip allowed me the opportunity to meet individuals like Mohammed, Yassine, Youseff, Wafaa (and everyone else I apologize for not mentioning) not a broad impersonal group, like Americans, or Moroccans, Muslims and Christians. Within minutes of arriving on campus at Ben M'sik, even before I knew what direction I was walking in, I knew I was among friends. My wall began crumbling, because each brick now had a name, a face, and a smile.

Every minute in Morocco was wonderful. I would not change a moment of it. There were parts of it that were very exciting, with a lot of hustle and activity, and parts that were slow that allowed for personal reflection and friendship building. I think that one of my favorite moments was the night of the first day. The first day was very exciting with the opening of the Ben M'sik Community Museum. It was impossible not to be energized by the excitement, and every member of the KSU group felt it. After everything was over, we went on a tour

of Casablanca. The last stop, occurring just about sunset, was a walk around Masjid Hassan II. Built right on the coast, overlooking the ocean, the mosque is an extremely impressive building. Walking around the mosque, gawking at its majesty, gave us the chance to connect with the members of the Ben M'Sik Team. I will never forget that night, the mosque, the sunset, the ocean, and our conversations.

One of the greatest compliments of my life was being allowed to talk to a class at Ben M'sik about something that I love, baseball. We were asked to present a lecture on different aspects of American culture. I knew that baseball was not a widely played game, if at all, in Morocco. However, people did come. They did not come to listen to my lecture about baseball or Jackie Robinson. They came because they wanted to let us know, as their guest, that no matter what was said in newspapers and on television, that they as individuals, did care about us, about our project, and a chance to change the world for the better. It was also an experience that I will always cherish and never forget.

On that trip, I met friends that I hope to keep for the rest of my life. Friends whom I share interests with, friends that I can share life stories with, friends that I can ask and give help to, and friends I intend to visit again. I cannot change the world; I can only affect the world around me, and make it a better place for my son and the children of my friends. I hope that we have become a microcosm of the world that awaits our children. Because of my experience with the MCCA project, my psychological "wall" is torn down, and my broken heart is open. I know that what we have done is right, by being friends; we will lead by example, not retreat to the safety that ambivalence can afford. We are doing what no gun or bomb can do, we are speaking, we are caring, and because of it, I have changed for the better, as has the world of my son.

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During April of 2010, members of the Ben M'sik team came to visit us in Atlanta. We were very excited to see them again, and repay their generosity and hospitality. While in the U.S., they received the grand tour of our "southern capital" and our nation's capital, Washington D.C. However, nothing seemed more apropos for their visit and the success of our project, then what we witnessed on their last night in Atlanta. We went to a Major League Baseball game. I have attended thousands of baseball games and never have I seen what we saw that night, a no-hitter. This baseball rarity, and one of the most exciting things that could happen during a game, acted, to me, as Divine approval of our actions as a group. I am glad we were given the opportunity to experience that together.