

“The Jihad”

My hometown of Victor lies in an idealized corner of upstate New York. It is an enclave concealed in the miles of suburban sprawl emanating from the City of Rochester. Devoid of any real defining traits, Victor is locally recognized for its above-average school system and large mall. While this community has much personal significance to me, it is an insignificant speck on the globe: with its clean air, successful schools, lack of crime, and an almost homogenously white population, how could it not be? Victor is the epitome of average, its most noteworthy characteristic the ability to precisely fit the framework of everything one envisioned when they dreamed up “some small town”.

I had lived in Victor for about two and a half years before I met Usman, and when I finally met him, it was only in passing – I gave him some chocolate, and he said he’d vote for me during Student Council elections. He was a senior when I was a junior, and it was nice to curry their favor: historically, they had considerable sway over the outcome of the yearly elections. Outside of that, I knew almost nothing about him: he was ranked near the top of his class, honored for his high scores on the AP Biology and AP Physics exams. I had heard he used to be an athlete with considerable prowess in a swimming pool, but I never had taken the time to verify these rumors myself. Also, I knew – both from hearing about him and from seeing him – that he was “brown”. As an aftereffect, this made him very popular with some people and completely unknown to others. Personally, I didn’t really have an opinion. I didn’t really understand what being “brown” entailed, and I didn’t care, either. As far as I was concerned, we were both students who crossed paths peacefully and with a smile from time to time: a simple but satisfying relationship between casual friends.

The 2004-2005 year was notable to the administration for two primary reasons. First, test scores were at an all-time high. Second, bomb threats were at an all-time high. My high school suffered through what seemed to be the worst disciplinary year in living memory, featuring many minor scares and two all-out bomb threats, complete with threatening notes and demands. School procedure was very clear about such threats: students evacuated to the nearby bus garage while policemen searched the premises. So when reports flooded the office warning us something called “Jihad cards” scattered about the school, I wasn’t too concerned. If someone was waging holy war against me personally, they were really doing me and many other students a favor. As was almost always the case, my friends and I would leave class, enjoy a walk down to the bus garage, play a few games of *Magic: The Gathering*, and probably dodge the last

period of the day. This hot May Monday appeared especially convenient for me: I would miss part of a particularly “boron” AP Chemistry lecture, and might even evade AP English, too. When the threat was subverted before we even reached the bus garage, I was filled with immense disappointment – and confusion. Did the administrators implement a more effective security plan?

As is typical within high school, lunchtime revealed all. Today, especially, the cafeteria bustled with rumor and discussion. After sifting through the conjecture and considering the facts – of which there were few – my peers and I concluded the administration felt Usman was responsible. Even so, we couldn’t determine why. His record was impeccable, especially compared to the standard miscreant that attempts a prank of this magnitude. After interviewing his twin brothers, members of the freshman class, I discovered that he was removed almost entirely because of his skin color. Outraged, I decided I “was having none of that shit.” Sprinting to an art classroom, I spent the remainder of my lunch crafting a sign of protest out of a massive piece of posterboard, and designed it to be worn like a necklace. In large, bold, legible print, it read: “Free Usman.” The sign cloaked my entire body, its message superimposed over my jacket. I wore this sign for the rest of the day, not really expecting to accomplish anything. My desire was simply to spread the message, enabling me to determine who felt the school’s reaction was right and who did not. An overpowering majority did not support the decision to remove him.

I rolled my sign up before heading to school the following day. If Usman were present, I decided, I would have no need for the sign and would discard it. If he remained removed, the sign would be worn. Not only did I wear the sign, but my efforts at protesting redoubled after I learned Usman was given a five day suspension, with expulsion a possibility. Worse yet, Usman was going to miss the class where he would present his senior thesis paper. As a result, Usman would face a 50% penalty on his final exam in English – a class he must complete to graduate. There were no make-up presentations; it appeared this academic penalty was a necessary consequence of his alleged misdeeds. Donning my sign, I disagreed, and sent the school into what I hoped would be a refined display of civil disobedience. The end result presented itself in more of an unbridled movement of anarchy directed at a fabricated enemy, but the faculty and staff heard the message in one way or another: we, the student body, wanted Usman’s case reviewed.

I’ll probably never know if it was the administration’s independent contemplation of the matter or my reaction to it that ultimately “freed” Usman. I do know that an additional room

had to be allocated to contain the number of people with detentions that day: almost five times the standard with me included in that number. Like a witty t-shirt might tell you, civil disobedience is still disobedience. I also know that Usman served his five day suspension, but was able to present his senior thesis. I can affirm that last fact personally: I had dodged my detention to observe his secret, after-school presentation from a closet. Usman spoke with the complexity and clarity of an accomplished orator.

“My presentation is entitled My Jihad: Being Brown in America. In my culture, and as I was taught in my family, a jihad is a struggle...”

For the duration of the presentation, I felt very sad. While I had reacted with anger towards the turn of events, Usman intellectualized the incident, and analyzed it from multiple perspectives. In fact, this was the focus of his presentation. My battle was with an invisible, probably nonexistent enemy: some nebulous and undefined force which oppressed him arbitrarily. His jihad, as he called it, was a struggle against ignorance and misunderstanding. Usman wanted to fight fear and replace it with understanding; he wanted to fight anger and replace it with peace. What was perhaps the most saddening about his presentation was his well-argued claim that incidents of unexplained aggression happen all the time to people who are like him and people who look like him. Very often these microcosmic paroxysms are a response to one’s own fear of different people or the events of September 11, 2001. Usman very articulately explained that he did not believe in fighting hate with hate, and concluded his presentation without even a hint at a personal account of his experiences. He received a perfect score; I received a new mission.

The school year rolled to a close without much talk of the incident, or any similar incidents. When anyone asked, I simply asserted that Usman was fine and he encouraged us to not fight with one another. When Usman returned to school, he reintegrated himself silently and peacefully. He is the true hero of this story and the greatest embodiment of his own cause. Even so, I felt personally addressed by his speech. I never wore the sign again, and along with the sign, I cast off as much hate as I could. I get the feeling many of my peers did as well.

At graduation, Usman received his diploma while giving the principal of my school a hug. Sitting in the audience, I knew that his jihad ended as he walked across the stage. From my vantage point near the back of the auditorium, I watched happily while a wave of amazement sped through the audience, causing many to recede back into their seats in quiet contemplation. Usman seemed like quite a humanitarian at that age, and almost everyone shared that opinion.

With unmatched heroism, Usman made sure a battle won in the past by luminaries like Dr. King remained won in the future. To have witnessed the struggle is an honor, and to accept the cause personally is yet a greater honor. Like Usman said during his thesis, “No one has control over whether or not they are oppressed. Everyone has control over whether or not they choose to oppress.” By refusing to enable hatred to become an active participant in my discussions or activities, I do justice to the work of Dr. King – and to my friend, Usman.