



“Taking a Stand” Case Study: Eboo Patel

Change happens internally before it takes place in the world. My transformation was catalyzed by a moment of failure.

In high school, the group I ate lunch with included a Cuban Jew, a Nigerian Evangelical, and an Indian Hindu. We were all devout to a degree, but we almost never talked about our religions with one another. Often somebody would announce at the table that he couldn't eat a certain kind of food, or any food at all, for a period of time. We all knew religion hovered behind this, but nobody ever offered any explanation deeper than "my mom said," and nobody ever asked for one.

This silent pact relieved all of us. We were not equipped with a language that allowed us to explain our faith to others or to ask about anyone else's. Back then, I thought little about the dangers lurking within this absence.

A few years after we graduated, my Jewish friend reminded me of a dark time during our adolescence. There were a group of kids in our high school who, for several weeks, took up scrawling anti-Semitic slurs on classroom desks and making obscene statements about Jews in the hallways. I did not confront them. I did not comfort my Jewish friend. I knew little about what Judaism meant to him, less about the emotional effects of anti-Semitism, and next to nothing about how to stop religious bigotry. So I averted my eyes and avoided my friend, because I couldn't stand to face him.

A few years later, he described to me the fear he had experienced coming to school those days, and his utter loneliness as he had watched his close friends simply stand by. Hearing him recount his suffering and my complicity is the single most humiliating experience of my life. I did not know it in high school, but my silence was betrayal: betrayal of Islam, which calls upon Muslims to be courageous and compassionate in the face of injustice; betrayal of America, a nation that relies on its citizens to hold up the bridges of pluralism when others try to destroy them; betrayal of India, a country that has too often seen blood flow in its cities and villages when extremists target minorities and others fail to protect them.

My friend needed more than my silent presence at the lunch table. Pluralism is not a default position, an autopilot mode. Pluralism is an intentional commitment that is imprinted through action. It requires deliberate engagement with difference, outspoken loyalty to others, and proactive protection in the breach. You have to choose to step off the faith line onto the side of pluralism, and then you have to make your voice heard. To follow Robert Frost, it is easy to see the death of pluralism in the fire of a suicide bombing. But the ice of silence will kill it just as well.

Re-printed from the introduction of Acts of Faith by Eboo Patel.

Discussion Questions

1. Have you ever experienced a similar situation as Eboo Patel or his friend? Explain.
2. What should Eboo Patel have done?
3. How do we respond to bigotry or racism? How should we respond?



“Taking a Stand” Case Study: Leena’s Story

(60 minute Activity Guide)

One day at school, I was walking through the cafeteria with my friend Emily. We both have a habit of looking down when we walk and occasionally pick up loose change. She spotted a penny and picked it up - it was ‘heads’ up.

“Jew!” a voice called out. I looked up suddenly and my smile faded. I flashed back to the *Walking the Walk* meeting a weekend before. I remembered my Jewish friend from Main Line Reform Temple explaining how much it hurt her when her school went through an anti-Semitic stage and so many jokes about Jews were going around. Then, I thought back to when Reverend Nicole, our Group Leader, read excerpts from Eboo Patel’s book on pluralism. Because of those recent memories of friends expressing their internal pain, I couldn’t bring myself to just keep walking. The last thing my new friends needed was for people like me to ignore these anti- Semitic remarks. Eboo Patel, the founder of the interfaith youth movement, had a similar experience when he was in high school. Eboo’s words of regret for not speaking up flooded me like a wave, and I felt obliged to not let the occasion pass without a response.

In that moment, I foresaw the regret I knew I would have if I didn’t speak up. I would not let myself walk by and throw away everything I’d learned this year through *Walking the Walk*, which taught me through interactive learning and self-discovery how to handle this type of situation. This was my time to turn on the diversity switch and address that boy who shouted the hurtful remark.

I approached the boy’s table. He looked surprised as he realized I was serious. As I looked him in the eyes, my only response was, “Not funny.”

He cringed as with guilt and remorse. At least I felt glad that he was forced to rethink his actions. Even though Emily laughed it off, I made sure she knew that I didn’t think his behavior was acceptable.

Since that day, I feel that it is a matter of honor to defend myself and my friends’ religious identities. For now and in the future, I will never be daunted by such situations; in fact, I look at them as potential opportunities to continue the dialogue.



“Taking a Stand” Case Study: Hannah’ Story

After my first year with *Walking the Walk*, I was part of a summer social action program at a university. In my class was a Jordanian girl, my age, named Zaha. We had learned a lot about each other. I knew that she was a Jordanian Muslim here to experience America and learn about social justice. She knew I was an American Jew who, like her, loved the Jonas Brothers. I wanted to be friends with her because I wanted to know more about her, her culture, and her beliefs, and I wanted her to know about mine. I knew that each of our cultures taught us stereotypes about one another that I wanted to prove false. I didn’t know if she ever had the opportunity to talk with someone Jewish.

As the days passed we became really close. We talked about a lot of things including light, teen things to deeper, more serious things. We talked about Jordan and Israel, about religion, and our desire for peace. We understood that while she is taught to think that I am a terrorist, and I am taught to think the same of her, the reality could not be more different. We realized the hate between our cultures was unnecessary, unwarranted, and needed to end.

One day in class, Isaac, a tall, lanky boy with a deep voice and scruffy beard, made a comment about Muslims who are raised to be terrorists, who are brought up to be warriors of their faith. The ease with which he spoke about that stereotype shocked some, and hurt Zaha. She didn't know what to make of it, how to react to it. Saying she had to go to the bathroom, she walked briskly out of the classroom, tears beginning to form in her brown eyes. I followed her, and we began to talk.

She told me about the misconceptions people have about her religion.... that she and her community don't consider “those terrorists”, “those extremists”, to be Muslims at all. She never associates herself with them. In her thick accent she said, "The word Islam means 'peace'". She wanted people to learn about her religion, to understand it. We talked about the media and its contributions to the false stereotypes of Muslims. We talked about Isaac. We knew he meant no harm. But we also knew he had said something out of line that was very hurtful and dangerous.

Our teacher came outside to see what was happening. She encouraged us go inside and tell the class what we had just told each other. We walked back into the room and I sat down next to Zaha, who was too upset to speak. I tried to explain to the class why she was upset, but although I felt confident in my position and knew exactly what I wanted to say, I suddenly found myself too emotional to speak. I didn’t know why. I managed to get out a few words, enough to get my message across, and then opened the floor to discussion so I wouldn’t need to speak anymore. Fortunately, the class responded well. They reassured a tearful Zaha that they knew the media lies. They understood that she was rightfully upset. Some of them got tears in their eyes as well. It was a pretty emotional experience. Isaac apologized. Zaha and I smiled at each other.

That day, we all learned that stereotypes can be weapons. We can't live in fear of other cultures, because peace will never be achieved as long as fear exists. This experience taught me the value of this interfaith work we are doing with the Interfaith Center. I felt that I could not have been the friend I was to her had I not been a part of *Walking the Walk*.