

A plea for tolerance

By Rany Jazayerli

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As a nation, we grieve. Even as the hours since the horrific attack on our country pass into days, and our society begins the slow but necessary return to normalcy, we grieve. We are hurt, we are angry, and we are determined to make sure that such evil never threatens our families and our homes again. And we feel this as a nation, feel it in every community, regardless of race, regardless of religion, as united today as any time in our history.



Several hundred members of the Sikh-American community attended a candlelight vigil at Los Angeles City Hall on Sunday.

Yet there is a community that feels the hurt, the anger, and the determination more acutely than any other. A community that was not only wounded by the events of last Tuesday, but now must live in constant fear that, because of the actions of a couple dozen psychopaths from half a world away, they will suffer the consequences. I have been a baseball writer for over six years, and hardly a day goes by that I don't count my blessings for the opportunity to write about the most uniquely American pastime. But today I can't afford to think about our Great American Game, because I'm too busy thinking about what it means to be an American.

You see, I am a Muslim. I am an Arab-American. And right now I am scared to death that in a country I have loved all my life -- in the only country I have ever called my own -- I am no longer truly free. I feel imprisoned by the hatred of others, those blind to the difference between a sick, demented terrorist and a peace-loving American.

That's not melodrama. Hundreds of Americans whose only crime is to be of a different race or religion have been verbally and physically assaulted over the past week. A friend's mother had racial epithets hurled at her at a grocery store. Another friend rushed to pick up his son last Thursday after the Muslim school his son attended received a bomb threat. Mosques around the country have received so many threatening phone calls they've turned off their answering machines. A mosque in Chicago -- one I've attended in the past -- was set upon by an angry mob of 300 people; only police intervention prevented a catastrophe.

But not every catastrophe has been averted. Several mosques around the country have been firebombed. Cars were deliberately crashed into two mosques Monday. A Pakistani business owner in Dallas was murdered over the weekend in what police are calling a hate crime. A Sikh gas station attendant in Arizona (who, in a tragic irony, was neither Arab nor Muslim) was shot and killed.

Some Americans have a tremendous ignorance of Muslims and Arabs, and from ignorance can emerge fear and hatred. Many Americans have no idea that more than 7 million Muslims and another 3 million non-Muslims of Arab descent are in this country. Many Americans don't realize that the majority of Muslims in this country are not Arab, but African-American, and that the majority of Arab-Americans are Christian.

Many Americans are unaware that Muslims don't all look like Saddam Hussein or Osama bin Laden; I could pass as Mike Sweeney's brother. Or that Arabs can't all be identified because they have funny names. My buddy John Sickels covers the minor leagues for ESPN.com, and is one of the most patriotic Americans I know; he's also half-Palestinian. Or that Arab-Americans have been a part of the political process in this country for years. You might recognize names like George Mitchell, Donna Shalala, Ralph Nader, Helen Thomas and John Sununu. All are Arab-Americans.

Most importantly of all, I fear that some Americans are under the impression that terrorism is somehow

compatible with Islamic teachings. So let me be perfectly clear about this: Islam does not condone terrorism in any way, shape, or form. Rather, it condemns it in the harshest possible terms. The killing of innocent civilians, no matter how desperate the plight of the perpetrators, no matter how meaningful their cause, is a capital sin. (Islam also forbids drinking alcohol, but that didn't stop one of the alleged terrorists from drinking at a strip club a few days before the attack, or another alleged terrorist from being arrested twice on DUI charges in the last year.)

The men who committed these acts might have thought their death would bring martyrdom, but if there were any martyrs last Tuesday, it was the brave men and women of the NYPD and FDNY who lost their lives trying to save others.

To put it another way: the terrorists who committed this bloody act were Muslim in the same way that Timothy McVeigh or David Koresh were Christian. Unfortunately, I'm afraid that many Americans aren't getting this message. In Monday's edition of USA Today, 49 percent of Americans polled supported special IDs for Arabs, including U.S. citizens. Half of our country today supports an idea straight out of Nazi Germany, which should give pause to every freedom-loving American.

Thankfully, millions of Americans have been vocal in their support of their fellow citizens. For every American who has approached a mosque brandishing a gun or a Molotov cocktail, there have been hundreds more who have come bearing roses. Thousands of Americans have embraced their Muslim and Arab neighbors in prayer vigils and interfaith community gatherings. But just as it took only a few terrorists to destroy our nation's sense of security, it takes a tiny number of racists willing to act on their anger to make millions of Americans fear for their safety.

Muslims and Arabs did not come to this country to destroy it -- they came to embrace it. They came, like every other immigrant group to land on America's shores, to escape oppression and discover freedom. They came to forge their own destiny. They came to live the American dream.

Tragically, many Muslims and Arabs who were living that dream perished in Tuesday's nightmare along with their fellow Americans. About 50 Muslims who worked at the World Trade Center are among the missing and feared dead, and dozens more were Christian Arabs. A Muslim couple -- who I just learned were friends of a friend -- were on Flight 11.

We all grieve together.

What do sports have to do with this? Nothing, and everything. Sports are a useless diversion at a time like this, a time when we need our useless diversions more than ever. And in sports, the common goal of winning ultimately renders a player's background irrelevant. When Jackie Robinson broke the color line, he proved he had as much grace and dignity as any white American -- helping to set the stage for the civil rights movement a decade later. Hank Greenberg's staunch patriotism in a time of war helped quiet the anti-Semitism talk in this country. Roberto Clemente's courage and unselfishness made him a quiet ambassador for the growing Hispanic population in America.

Today, I hope that the accomplishments of Muslim and Arab athletes in this country, both on and off the field, will help remind us of the basic humanity in people of all backgrounds. I hope that people might reflect on the charisma and genius of a Muhammad Ali, or the grace of a Hakeem Olajuwon, and understand that just as Muslim athletes are committed to the same goals, on and off the field, as their fellow athletes, so too are Muslims in this country as innately American as anyone else.

And I pray that those people who want to punish their neighbors for the actions of others will recognize that in lashing out at innocent people on the basis of their ethnicity or religion, they are committing the exact same sin that was perpetrated by the terrorists themselves.

May God bless America. May God bless her with the strength to defeat evil, the courage to defend the good, and above all, the wisdom to tell the difference.

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A group of Muslims pray for the victims of the terrorist attacks at the Masjid Al-Islam Mosque in North Smithfield, R.I.

