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Turn the page on phobias

By Sarah Sobanski

On a cold January night, I found myself devouring a heaping plate of Polish food at the Wilno Tavern. While blaspheming my grandmother's cabbage rolls against the ones I was currently drooling over, a friend of a friend came over and introduced himself. Introductions were what they were. The beer came. The band began to play.

Some empty glasses later and this friend leaned over the table to ask me: ?Do you think I'm gay??

There are few things I dislike more than being put on the spot. Of all the things running through my mind at that moment, not one of them was if he was or wasn't gay. The first thing that came out of my mouth, however, was: ?You can be whatever you want to be.? Of course this wasn't along the line of right things to say. I was then asked a half-a-dozen more questions including: ?Why do you think I'm gay?? ?Why does everyone think I'm gay?? ?What gave you that impression??

Honestly, it just never crossed my mind. If it did it was a whisper of a passing thought. All I gained from this conversation was that I was lucky enough to grow up in a family where sexual orientation wasn't something to fuss over.

This conversation comes in the wake of LGBTQ content being removed from the State Department's website in the U.S., according to *NBC News*. Not just the Secretary of State's apology for the ?Lavender Scare,? the article reports, but nearly every other mention. The Trump administration also signed executive orders to start building that wall along his Mexican border, and banning immigration from seven ?Muslim-majority? countries: Syria, Iraq, Iran, Yemen, Libya, Somalia and Sudan ? according to *CNN*.

After the mosque shooting in Quebec, I realized maybe it wasn't just Trump ? something a friend has been trying to convince me of since his inauguration. He's the easy one to blame ? if the toupee fits ? but there are a hundred people behind him, a hundred people behind them, and so on and so forth.

Homophobia; the base root of why anyone wants to know if you think they're gay but they're not, and sometimes if they are; hate for immigrants, Islamophobia and on and on is really our own damn faults. We perpetuate it by asking these questions, or by automatically wondering things such as if someone whose skin colour is brown is a Muslim.

I don't know about you, but I am getting really tired of telling the human race to just get along and play nice.

In less than a year our community will be sheltering a refugee family from Syria. The Jarads have been registered for the immigration process by the Canadian government and are waiting patiently to be approved ? in limbo, in Turkey, where they fled for the safety of their children and their family.

?We're looking at probably the fall,? Judy Edgar of Social Justice Without Borders told me when I called to check that the Jarads weren't feeling intimidated by the fear-mongering happening across North America.

Edgar said: ?Canada is the place to be. I am so happy I am Canadian right now. I'm glad I'm in Bancroft a little further from the border. I'm glad to say I am Canadian but people are influenced. They watch American media. How many people watch Fox News here??

Canada has a better reputation for acceptance. It's a line we carefully toe.

?It's difficult for me to speak directly to [the Jarads]. I have a cousin of theirs that I've been in touch with who's fluent in English and she interprets. I really should speak to her and let her know to let the Jarads know that all things are still good in Canada.?

I can't imagine fearing for the lives of my family, for my life, fleeing my country, and then fearing the people of the country I was fleeing to. I would be afraid of us. Look at the way we're heading.

But I asked, because I felt it was the right thing to do, to try and get every angle and put myself in the place of someone who is Islamophobic. I asked Edgar if she has ever felt threatened or intimidated by the Jarads.

?No threat at all. I feel much more threatened by other people.?

These issues connected to phobias seem so outlandish and obscure and fiendishly outdated. It wasn't that long ago that we faced these issues in our own country ? are still facing them. If they seem long-gone, listen to the guy sitting across from you. He's the one asking the harmless question or wondering if you're wondering the same thing about someone's religion. That alone speaks to so much more.

Let's move past condemning people for their life choices.