

A week ago, in my alhuda class, my teacher said, "it doesn't matter whatever community you are from, it is only your iman/faith and righteous deeds that make you people of paradise." Immediately, tears filled my eyes, and an image of Malcolm X came to mind. Malcolm X embodies the life of someone who tried to live by this example. You see, I had been reading Malcolm X's autobiography by Alex Haley for about 6 months; by then, I hadn't been halfway through the book. An avid reader, I went through books quickly and sometimes in one day. Still, this particular autobiography had me howling out loud in laughter, and the weight of the words on those pages depicted the life of a man that required so much pausing and deep reflection. Malcolm X's story and the book meant a lot to me the first time I had knowledge of him, and the second time, I had begun to read his full autobiography as an adult. Both encounters came at a most opportune time where they had such a deep impact on my very being.

The first time came in the form of a small autobiography summary of his life as a young Somali immigrant preteen navigating junior high social and racial intricacies. The second time was probably my most blatant and most real exposure to racism (a couple months ago). I had been a young Somali immigrant in the eighth grade when I heard of a Muslim African American man. This introduction of Malcolm X was important in my association with Muslim Americans in general. My parents had immigrated from Somalia about five years after the civil war, and it felt as if we moved from one Somali community to another. In essence, the only type of people I had known were Somalis. All my life, I had been surrounded by Somalis. It was only when I had started attending a school that my exposure to other groups became more apparent and of other religious groups. I attended a small Public school in Ohio and felt almost this 'other' feeling in my sense of belonging as I was but a few Somali children attending. It was during an autobiography project in school that I came upon a short summary of his life. Till then, I hadn't known much about him, but my heart swelled with joy in seeing someone who was a homegrown American Muslim living and nurturing his Islam here in the very country that my family immigrated to. Here was someone who made me think of my heritage as someone of color who was at some point alive and well, thriving in his faith, and helping others to do the same. Many communities lay claim to Malcolm X as their community member, in his life's work as bettering the lives of the disfranchised, colored, minority, and a voice for people of his heritage, but nonetheless Malcolm was/ is for all people, in all places, and for all time. His life experiences transcend and speak to different genders, races, and people from all walks of life.

Parts of his story resonated with me and was brought to the forefront of my thoughts on what has been the most racist encounter of my life. I say most racist because up till that point (at thirty-two) and a Somali immigrant, I believed myself to have been sheltered from the shackles of racism and its negative impact. I didn't realize just how sheltered up until that point.

I had been a nurse for about three years when a caregiver (grandmother) of a patient (an infant), while I was in the midst of caring for her grandson, began to narrate to me of an experience she once had. This story is unprovoked by no preceding incident and certainly out of the blue. However, it begs whether a person's need to act out in a racist manner ever requires a triggering/or a preluding act. This grandmother began to narrate an incident that occurred while employed as a university environmental services individual and her interaction with her male co-worker. She went on to say that her co-worker invited her to a Bob Marley concert in which he invited her to pick her up at her home with three of his buddies in his car. In reply to his invitation, she tells me she told this co-worker, "no, I will not go into a car with four (insert N-word)." In my naivete and never having been exposed to such language before, I froze almost in confusion. I blurted out, "and he was ok with you using words like this and saying something like this?" She replied, "it's how I talk/we talked back then like this, it's normal" Thinking that nothing was normal about her words or intent, I asked her to not use this type of language around me. She should be wise to not use it ever again to anyone. I mentioned how offensive her language was, and she should stop. In digging deeper in finding her intent at telling me this story and what it would mean for me in working with her grandson, I said to her, "I'm a person of color, and you just got done telling me a story of you not wanting to be in the same vicinity of people of color, are you uncomfortable with me?..if so, I'm caring for your grandson. I will continue to do so, but could get you a different nurse" She declined and apologized, stating that she came from a time long ago and this is just how she talked and pulled her phone and began to show me pictures of people of color and stated that she was not racist. I finished the last three hours of my shift in caring for her grandson, and reported her behavior before my next shift, and soon after was removed from dealing with her.

Needless to say, I went home that night with a heavy heart and much melancholy. The reality was no one up till that point from the age of seven in being in this country to thirty-two years ever spoke such words to me. The particular word she used had no power over me because that is not who/what I am. My mind focused on the fact that she was uncomfortable with people of color, and for the first in my life, I had witnessed someone who disliked/or didn't want to associate with someone based on the color of their skin. It confused me so much, and I thought of Malcolm X, and perhaps a small inkling of what he must have felt when in the eighth grade in foster care, his foster parents who had such liking to him, still continued to call him the n-word, as it was so normal to just use the words. Of this incident as told to Alex Haley, he writes, "They would talk even about me, or about "insert n" as though I wasn't there, as if I wouldn't understand what the word meant. A hundred times a day, they used the word "insert the word." I suppose that in their own minds, they meant no harm; in fact, they probably meant well" (p.31) To explain this, Alex writes by way of Malcolm x "What I'm trying to say is that it just never dawned upon them that I could understand, that I wasn't a pet, but a human being.

They didn't give me credit for having the same sensitivity, intellect, and understanding that they would have been ready and willing to recognize in a white boy in my position" (p. 31).

It's been months since that racist encounter. I'm not crippled by it, nor do I think about it, but I do think about Malcolm X often and more so in the last couple of weeks with the death of George Floyd and many more. Although I was in uncharted waters in ever having to stand up for myself in the face of blatant racism, I found strength in knowing I stood my ground and that if I ever encountered a similar situation, I would know exactly how to handle it; with my head held high and with words of education to counter ignorance and dislike. My friend/classmate who was of mixed white/black parentage used to tell me that African Immigrants have experienced a completely different life experience coming to the U.S. Those of African Americans parentage from the soils of the United States have had heavy toil of racism that have greatly impacted their entire generations up till this point, in other words, she was trying to tell me that there was so much that individual of color growing up in this country, with parents, grandparents, and great-grandparents who faced racism and at some point slavery, had to wade through and to overcome. No question that the cycling of oppressive behaviors has greatly impacted all these generations' psyche. I was born in a country of people who looked just like me, and soon afterward settled amongst a community that looked just like me. Though my country has had its tribalism struggle, the question of color or being treated differently based on skin color was never an issue. There was so much pride and dignity in being human and just being who we were. I have always felt comfortable and confident in who I was and never felt inferior to anyone. In fact, terms of black/white-skinned as terms of bondages/ and reasons to separate others was a foreign concept, hence my confusion many times growing up when asked to fill out race questions, checking off black/ white boxes, all of us just used to think, I'm Somali. Considering the times we live in, we are more in need of reading about one of the best people on this earth who handled racism and inequality with such grace; that of the life of Malcolm X. I reflect on his life and the lessons my soul can cling to.

Lessons from Malcolm X's life for the Somali Immigrant soul:

- Acknowledge the time you live in and recognize the blessings you have due to the groundwork the likes of Malcolm X, Dr. Martin Luther King, and Muhammad Ali did.
- Remember that God guides people's hearts and removes them from the darkness that they find themselves in. Reflect on Malcolm X's life before he found God, as with it came purpose. But remember where he was. No one is exempt from this journey and transformation.
- Gain knowledge of life and spiritual learning to better yourself. It's never too late to educate yourself, to read, and grow as a person. If Malcolm X uplifted himself in the darkest isolated place (jail) from an eighth-grade education to that of a self-taught man by reading everything he could get his hands on, reflected, and then pushed himself into

action, then you and I have no excuses for not reading often and enough. I will most likely have much to say and write regarding Malcolm x's book.

References: X, Malcolm, and Alex Haley. *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*. New York: Grove Press, 1965.