

The Unforgettable Interview

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“In what ways do you see your faith negatively impacting your career in the future?” I stared at the man sitting on the other side of the desk from me as I let his words settle in. A feeling of confusion and awe followed my lagged comprehension of what I was being asked by a PhD recipient, credentialed researcher, and medical school interviewer. As I crafted a response that I thought would appease him, I found a part of me reflecting back on my life. I envisioned all the surprised reactions I receive every time I tell people that I grew up in an area referred to as “Lower Alabama”; a town consisting of three traffic lights, a population of less than three thousand individuals, and a very conservative, right-winged, Islamophobic-ridden atmosphere. However, now what shocks everyone even more than when I tell them about my upbringing is when I tell them that the most prejudice I have ever faced arose in a medical school interview. To this day, any time I think back to this interview, I sense a shiver roll down my spine. I can still vividly recall Dr. G’s face as I explained to him that my faith has never in the past, nor will in the foreseeable future, ever impact my medical career. Thinking that the worst was over, I recall the tense atmosphere that filled the room when my interviewer took it upon himself to point out the difficulties I would face on my behalf. I hear his voice ringing in my ears as he asked me if I would be okay partaking in organ transplants if the organs were humanized pig organs. I see the uncertainty that filled his face when I recited to him the Quranic verse that compares saving one life to saving all of mankind; I see the doubt that filled his eyes as I explained to him the leniency in religious matters that accompanies life-or-death situations. After addressing his doubts, I felt myself breathe a sigh of relief thinking the worst was over. Dr. G,

however, was not convinced. Instead, he decided to take another approach. This man with a doctorate education took it upon himself to question me as to whether my answer could be found in my religious texts, or whether I had discussed this matter with the scholars, or whether everyone in the Muslim community would agree with me. As I responded to each question he attacked me with, I felt my stomach drop. None of the explanations I gave to my peers growing up in small-town America would appease this man. No clarification that I provided my interfaith circles calmed him down. This man sitting across the desk from me, the table symbolizing the power differential that divided the two of us, did not see me as a potential medical student at his school. He did not see my hard-earned grades, research endeavors, leadership positions, or community involvement. To him, I was just a problem waiting to happen. After what seemed like an eternity, the interview finally came to an end. As Dr. G directed me to my next interview room, I remember being in a state of shock as to what had just occurred.

Fast forward a few years, I now realize that I probably should have mentioned this incident to somebody. I now know of the rights that I had as an interviewee that I was not aware of at the moment. At the time, all I knew was that I was not, under any circumstances, going to send this man a thank you letter, nor would I attend this medical school. I still remember passing by this medical school on a daily basis, refusing to even look at its exterior out of disappointment.

Although this experience carried with it a lot of disappointment and frustration, I feel like it also provided me with growth, both in my personal life and in my professional career. It taught me the importance of educating students of their rights, even in situations where there is an

obvious power differential present. It taught me the importance of protecting my own rights and speaking out when they are impeded on. Most importantly, this experience taught me the importance of educating ourselves and those around us to be culturally competent and to be kind. Through this experience, I came to the conclusion that higher education does not automatically come with understanding, sympathy, and compassion. As we learn diagnoses, differentials, and treatments, we must also take out the time to learn these personal traits that will help us to be better physicians and better humans.