



Video Story Transcript

A Father's Gift

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Link to YouTube Video:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Bo5wPCYxg8>

Note : The following is a transcription of a spoken story performance and may not reflect textbook perfect English. It will guide you as you listen (or read) along.

Hi, my name is Noa Baum. I grew up in Israel. I grew up surrounded by conflict and war, always longing for peace. Today I use storytelling to build bridges for peace. And I often lead interfaith workshops between Jews, Muslims, and Christians. At one of these workshops in Rochester, New York, a Muslim man from Pakistan, Dr. Bilal Ahmed, told me this story about a gift he received from his father. He gave me the story to shape and retell and I offer it here to you.

Bilal grew up in Lahore and Pakistan. When he was a little boy, there was a war between Pakistan and India. And he asked his father, “Why is there all this hate between Muslims and Hindus?” His father said, “When you're older, I'll tell you.”

A few years later, Bilal turned 13. They went to visit his uncle's house in the north. Bilal loved those visits. He loved his uncle's house. It was... there was this great, big fountain right in the middle and all the doors opened to that fountain, and they would eat there on little stools around the fountain. There was a kitchen on one side, there were the stairway leading to the second story on the other. And the most wonderful thing about that house was the great banyan tree in the back of the house, where he would climb with his cousins. He was just about to run off to climb on the tree, when his father said, “Come, Bilal. It's time to answer your question.” What question? But instead of answering, his father took him by the hand and led him up the stairs, along the open balcony corridor overlooking the courtyard below. And he stopped at the very last room below. Bilal couldn't believe it. It was the attic room. It was the only room in the house that was ever locked. It was the ghost room.

“Aaah, Baba, I want to go play.”

“You'll play later. There's something I need to show you.” And so his father let him in. And the room was musty and dark, only a few rays of sunlight filtered in through the slits of the wooden shutters. Everything was covered with dust. Old furniture, his grandfather's helmet and musket from the World War, and a humongous trunk not far from the window, which his father now opened and took out a big, leather bound book. “Come Bilal. Look at this. This is our Bahi, the book of our family history. It is passed on through the generations, from the oldest son to the oldest son. That is why it is here. In your grandfath... in, in your uncle's house. He is my oldest brother. I want you to open it and look at it.”

Bilal had never seen anything so old in his life. It had hundreds of pages. He opened it. There on one of the very first pages, he saw his name. Bilal Ahmed Sahai, next to his brother Jamal and his sister Sarah! His mother, Naeema Cheema Sahi. His father, Ghulam Sahi. “Hey that's us!”

“Yes, that's us. That's our family. Keep looking.” And so, he turned the pages. Every page had about 10 names. Uncles, aunts, cousins, grandparents, people that he knew, people that he heard about. And he kept turning the pages, turning the page... and there was a name, “Singh Gurmeet Singh Sahi. That's not a Muslim name.”

“No, that is a Sikh name.

“Sikh?”

“Yes, they are your family too. Keep looking.” And so he kept turning the pages. Soon the paper was so old it was almost disintegrating in his hands.

And then, “Anil? What kind of name is that?”

His father said, “That's the Hindu name.”

“Hindu?!”

“Yes, they are your family too. Keep looking.”

And so, he kept turning the pages and soon it was no longer paper but parchment. And after a while, he couldn't even recognize the letters or the language. He looked up at his father, “I don't understand what does this mean?”

His father said, “You asked about the hate, remember? And I wanted you to see this. I wanted you to see that God lives in everything. And I don't want you ever to let anyone tell you to hate another. Because you can see they are all here. Muslims, Sikhs, Hindus, Christians, Jews. They're all your family.”

Well, Bilal was 13 years old. All he could think about was getting up and playing on the tree with his cousins. And the years passed, Bilal left Pakistan. He became a doctor. He settled in Rochester, New York with his wife and three children. And about two years after his father passed away, he heard about the National Geographic's genome project. Where they, they can map the travels and migrations of your family through the generations, across the world, according to your DNA. And they can also tell you who in the world is most closely, genetically, related to you. There are specific markers to specific population groups and if your markers matched those of someone else, then you are most closely genetically related to that person and they give them your email.

Bilal wanted to honor his father's memory. He knew his father was always interested in genealogy. And so he sent in a little swab from the inside of his cheek in a little glass vial, with a number on it. No name, no name at

all. And after a while the results arrived and there was a map of the entire world mapping the travels of his family. Like each and every human on this planet, they too began in Africa. And after thousands of years, migrated north, to the north part of Ukraine, Denmark, Poland. About 5000 years ago to the northern part of India and about a thousand years ago settled in what today is called Pakistan.

And then the emails began to arrive from his genetic relations. He got an email from somebody called David Barry Baum, someone called L. Frieburg, Clayton Schultz, Maurice Krasnow, Ed Leviten. It appears that according to the DNA results, the closest genetic relations of Dr. Bilal Ahmed, the Pakistani Muslim, are Jews from a small village in Poland. And it was then that he remembered. He turned to his 13-year-old daughter and he said, "You know, when I was about your age, my father took me to my uncle's house. And he showed me our Bahi, the book of our family history." He's been telling the story ever since. Bilal has been telling the story because he doesn't want his children ever to forget his father's words. "Don't you ever let anyone tell you to hate another because you can see they're all here. They are all your family."