



Video Story Transcript

More Alike Than Not

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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.

More alike than not. When the three of us started working together, Gerry, Arif and me, Susan, one thing we discovered, over and over again - we are so different. For instance, man, woman, black hair, red hair, less hair, brown skin, white skin, raised Muslim, raised Catholic, raised Jewish, white collar.

My father was a doctor. My father was a doctor too. Now my family, blue collar workers, mostly manual laborers, but we did have one teacher. Big family, small family, medium family. Ah huh, younger. Okay, older. But Gerry and I, we like to exercise every day and we eat healthy. Huh, and I consider potato chips a vegetable. So, you can see, we're really different.

In fact, sometimes the three of us would look each other and we'd say we're so different. How could we ever be friends? But then we kept working on our show. We started discovering how similar we were, for instance, how all-American our upbringings really were.

All of our families celebrated the Fourth of July. How more American than that can you be? Yeah. We celebrated Fourth of July and we had a barbecue - tandoori chicken! Ha, ha!

Food seemed to be the common element for all of our holidays. For instance, on Thanksgiving, my grandmother would always make her prized, lime green Jell-O mold with those little miniature marshmallows suspended mid-mold.

Yes. And my family for Thanksgiving, amongst all the other foods, we also had Jell-O mold but we used the recipe from Julia Child with Grand Marnier.

Now see my working class, beer and peanuts family, we would not know what Grand Marnier, I can't even say it, Grand Marnier liqueur was. Ha, ha, ha! And in my Muslim family, we didn't even drink alcohol so I don't even know what a liqueur really is.

And all of our families were baseball fanatics. My teams were the New York Yankees and the Brooklyn Dodgers. And Arif and I, we're Chicago kids so we are waitin' for the Chicago Cubs to win the World Series. Go Cubs! Oh, and that's a real definition of faith!

Yeah, but then we kept talking about our faith traditions. We came to one major similarity - that we all pray to one God. And it's the same God, the God who spoke to Abraham.

And in all of our religions, at one time or another, the women covered their hair as a sign of respect and dedication, devotion. And in Judaism, the men also wear a skullcap when they pray and when they're indoors.

Yeah. Muslim men often cover their hair for prayer as well. And in all our faiths, we learned another language to practice our faith tradition. I had to learn Arabic to read the holy book, the Koran, and I learned Latin and I learned Hebrew. And we all have religious leaders. For Muslims, it's called the imam.

Now Catholicism, there's the priest, the bishops, the cardinal and then the pope. The Jews have a rabbi. Similarity though, in our religions most of the top leaders are men. Ha, ha, ha. And then sometimes we discover somp'in' that really surprises. For instance, Catholics, we believe in the virgin birth of Jesus and so do Muslims. And, see, we didn't know that.

But all of our religions have times for prayer and for fasting. I remember when I was a little kid, on Yom Kippur, we'd spend the whole day praying and fasting. Uh, All I wanted to do was to go home and eat.

Ha, ha, ha. For me as a Muslim, as a kid fasting, then sleep deprivation, every day for the 29 or 30 days of the holy month of Ramadan, I'd wake up before sunup to eat an entire medium cheese pizza and half of two liters of Diet Coke. So, I go that day from sunup to sundown with no food or drink.

And say the thing about how you sometimes you get stuck out traveling, you still have to pray when you're on the road. Right. Practicing Muslims pray five times a day no matter where you are. So, a few years back my uncle and I were driving on a rural highway in Illinois heading up toward Chicago. The sun was coming down, was time for Maghrib prayer. So, my uncle pulled the car into the gas station. We took our shoes and socks off, threw our coats on the grass nearby as prayer rugs and we bowed facing east to the holy city of Mecca. Just a few feet away from the gas pumps and the highway.

Now prayer for us meant all 12,000 of us parishioners of St. Thomas Moore Parish going to one of the many Sunday masses. I used to go with my grandma and she'd always bring her crystal rosary. And sometimes the sun would stream into the stained-glass windows, hit that rosary and spray rainbows up and down the pews. I thought my grandmother's rosary was made of magic diamonds.

As we were learning about all our faith traditions and the different facets and elements of our faith practices, we were showing all these flip charts and all the categories and the yellow sticky notes were posted with

different pieces of each of our faiths. And the more that we looked at all those little slips of paper and the more we told the stories behind all those little yellow slips, the more we realized that really, we were more alike than different even though our families came from very different parts of the world.

My family came from New York City. I grew up in Brooklyn, in a little neighborhood called Borough Park. Borough Park could have been called Sholahova, which was the name of the little shtetl town or Jewish town that my family had come from. The avenue of Borough Park was lined with all the old Jewish merchants - the pickle man, the poultryman, the kosher butcher, the shoemaker, the baker - everybody was Jewish. I didn't even know that the whole world wasn't Jewish until I went to public school.

I lived in a house with my great-grandmother, my grandfather, my great aunt Tillie, my great-uncle Sam, my aunt Alice, my uncle Sidney, my cousin Jenny, my mother, my father, my sister and me. Next door were my cousins, down the street were more cousins. The doors were always open. Everybody came in and out all day.

My first crib was a dresser drawer. That way whoever was in the house could take me up and down the stairs and whoever was staying there would watch me. Every month, the whole family came to our house for the family meeting and we discussed whatever problems anybody had. Did they need a job? Did they need a loan to start a business? Do they need to get married? Whatever problem you had, the family would help. And that ethic went out into the big world. When we were very little, my great-grandmother, she would give us a dollar bill and she would say, "Go get milk and butter but I don't want you to go to the big store. I want you to go to the little man. If we don't help the little man, who will."

Nowadays, well, the family still gathers. We celebrate holidays and life passages. And if we ever need help, we turn to each other and we know that there will always be help out there because if we don't help each other, who will.

Now I grew up in an ethnically diverse neighborhood. My neighborhood was only 90 percent Irish when my grandparents came from Ireland to Chicago. They moved to an inner-city neighborhood of Chicago in the early 1900s that was just about 100 percent Irish. And coming from another land, they must have felt some comfort in being in a city that had politicians with names like Kennelly and Kelly and Daley. Now many years later in the 1950s, I was born and when I was 10 months old, my parents took us out of that mostly 100 percent Irish type neighborhood and moved us to a new development on the outskirts of the city.

They felt like pioneers. There were no streets, no sidewalks. We didn't get mail delivered. And suddenly, they had new neighbors, some of whom had names such as English names or German names or Italian names. Now to my grandparents, this was a very dangerous situation because mixed neighborhoods could lead to... mixed marriages. And, sure enough, in high school didn't I go and date a boy named Jim Worpinski. A Polish boy. This was interracial dating back then. Now we may have been many different kinds of white ethnic groups but the thing that held us together is that neighborhood was 99 percent Catholic. If someone asked you were... where you were from, you would say your parish on the southwest side of Chicago. I would say, "St. Thomas Moore." I didn't know that the official city name for my neighborhood was Wrightwood 'til I was about 20 years old. Someone asked me where I's from, I said Tommy Moore because we're on a nickname basis with our St. And it did feel like ours. It was our St. Our neighborhood, our city.

When I heard Gerry talking about Borough Park, I realized that he and I have something in common. I also grew up in a Jewish neighborhood except I wasn't Jewish. And when I hear Gerry and Sue talk about growing up in their ethnic and religious enclaves, I realize how different my story really is because I grew up in a suburb of Chicago as the only Muslim boy... as the only Bangladeshi boy.

My parents came to America from a country called Bangladesh, a small country just between India and Myanmar. My father first came to America because he wanted to study medicine. And then he hoped to go back to Bangladesh when it would be safe for him to have economic and educational opportunities there. But his father, my grandfather, told him to stay in America because there might be civil war brewing. At the time, Bangladesh was called East Pakistan and it might be war between East Pakistan and Pakistan for Bengali freedom. So, my father stayed in America, made money, sent it back home to the family where my mother's family lived through the war. One of her cousins were... disappeared. The Pakistani army came and took him away. They never saw him again.

But later my father returned to marry my mother and they came and settled in Chicago where my dad, my dad got a job as a neurologist at Veterans Hospitals and we lived in this one high-rise, apartment building, because three other Bangladeshi families lived in that building too. So that was kind of our ethnic enclave. My mom and dad wanted to live there because they could share their language and their customs and their shared history and their shared loss from the war with those other families. But then one day, my dad decided to move away and buy a house in Northbrook. Now when I was living in that high-rise apartment, every morning our fathers would go off to work and our Bangladeshi mothers would gather those kids together and they would spend the day and they would trade each other's specialty, Bengali recipes like chicken korma or roshgulla, a nice dessert. But they also taught each other new American recipes that they were learning from box tops and the sides of ingredients boxes like spaghetti with meatballs or macaroni with cheese or tuna fish sandwiches. And the other kids and I would watch Sesame Street or Electric Company.

But then we moved to Northbrook and then we were isolated from those families. Those families became my surrogate aunts and cousins and... to us. And now I didn't see them very often, only on Saturdays at parties. And I lived in this... big house with my younger sister and my mom. And my sister and I played out... indoors quite a bit. I didn't play outside with the other white kids. They all seemed older and they seemed to know each other. They had all gone to preschool together. I didn't go to preschool with them so I didn't play with them and I was afraid of being different. There was always constant reminders in our house about how different we were. There was patriotic Bengali music on the record player and each house had a... each room in the house had these woodcuts of balishi vistas, rural fishermen fishing and farmers farming. When I, later, got older and had white friends and I went to their houses, they didn't have any of that stuff so I didn't want to be different. But I was and I came to accept it. My parents had always thought that we would eventually go back to Bangladesh once my father was settled and had more opportunity there but that never materialized. And it was a young country with a lot of political turmoil. And then I was born and my sister was born. And my, my younger brother was born and my parents decided that kids are American. Let's stay in America.

So, we wanted to share some of our stories with you today from our longer piece as long as everybody keeps in mind that nobody can speak for his or her group. I can't speak for all Catholics, which certainly means I can't speak for all Christians and I can't speak for all Jews. And I can't speak for all Muslims. These stories are just part of who we are.