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## CAN WE TALK?

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*Patricia*

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THE ELEPHANT IS IN THE ROOM, AND IT'S BIG. SO IT'S NOT MOVING. Not one turn. Not one inch. Still, my daughter and I talk around it, pretending our ten-ton problem isn't there—insisting it will stay quiet and be okay if we just ignore the obvious and keep on moving. So we're politely jawing about my kitchen cabinets and drawers, nicely talking about my fight to finally clean them out and make some order and find some peace.

"You're decluttering?" Alana says. "Why now? Your kitchen is fine."

But it's not fine. Not really. And neither are we. Not like we used to be. Or maybe never were.

Yet how can I even think such a thing? After all, I know God. I know all my God can do. That's how I boast anyway. Most days I boast, that is.

But it's the day before Mother's Day. Alana has called me on the phone to say hi, tell me she loves me, wish me the best. I'm hanging on to every word, as I always do when my daughters call, ecstatic to hear their living and lovely voices. Yet with Alana, there's always this wish: that things were different—back to the way they once were or the way I wish they'd always been, so long ago now I can't seem to remember.

Like they were? Yes. I wish she was still a Christian. No, that's not the whole of it. I wish on this day before Mother's Day something more. I wish she wasn't a Muslim. So now I've said it. In my heart. And right here on a page. Oh so quiet. But oh so brave. I've said it. Like a prayer. *O my*

*God.* Not boastful. Just a desperate plea. How did my younger baby leave the faith of Christ and stop believing?

On this almost Mother's Day, this mother wants to know: How did we come to this moment in time and, by faith, become divided?

Why, indeed, are we on the phone blah-blahing about my kitchen decluttering project—my countless trips to my neighborhood Bed Bath & Beyond and the Container Store in the fancy neighborhood across town and the Goodwill store down the street and wherever else I can go to chase down plastic shelf organizers and dividers—when the biggest part of our lives, what we believe about God and how we practice that belief, is such a split and holy wreck?

A Christian and a Muslim? In the same family? How, O blessed God, did such a thing happen? Too many times I tried to find an answer. God knows I tried. In prayers. In books. In dreams. In the quiet of silent nights and the roar of jam-packed days. Like mothers of daughters everywhere, I've stood in the silence of a locked room, stared at myself in a mirror, and asked God, why? And how? How in the robust name of Jesus did this happen?

And like those other mothers everywhere, I was angry when I asked. Mad at life. At my daughter. At myself. Maybe angrier at God for not stepping into the messiness of this business we call life and calling a divine stop. But God doesn't work that way.

And look how I say that. As if I do know God. As if I understand God. As if I accept with calm how God moves—and how God doesn't move—and how he lets us wrestle and struggle and grasp and stew and wail and wonder. Then he lets us choose, despite knowing beforehand how we're going to choose—even when he knows we'll choose wrong.

So the psalmist nailed it right? Saying it this way? That God knows “when I sit down or stand up. You know my thoughts even when I'm far away” (Ps. 139:2 NLT)?

So God knew?

He knew. Before this embattled earth was formed, he knew Alana and I would be rumbling over these three defiant words spouted from her beautiful confident mouth: “I’m a Muslim.”

My heart didn’t stop exactly. It sank straight to the floor.

But not from the announcement. It sank from the struggle that had brought us to this moment. First, those teen years—with their relentless arguments and fussing and door slamming and confusion and yelling. Then the testing years—when, at twenty, Alana joined the Nation of Islam. And I fought that. Arguing against the theology of the Nation. Thundering against the messages that sounded to me like too much hate.

Then at this big, big moment—when my daughter officially renounced Christianity by choosing to leave it for “orthodox Islam,” as she called it, I stayed silent.

And neutral.

“Thanks for letting us know,” I said. She was twenty-something and a junior in college. So I gripped the phone and asked about school. Her classes. Her teachers. How her car was running.

How her car was running?

Yes, I asked her exactly that.

Then we said a few other neutral things. Have a good afternoon. Thanks for calling. Talk to you later. Then I hung up the phone.

So I didn’t fight for Jesus. Not on that day. Not because I didn’t care. And not because I didn’t love every single thing about Jesus more than life itself—and still love him just as much, if not more now than on that day.

Yet I didn’t fight for him because, on that day, I just didn’t know how to fight.

My life had changed. My Christian daughter became a Muslim.

And my life and every single thing about life just flat-out flew apart.

So here I sit today, ten years after my daughter made her announcement, staring at my keyboard in my belabored home office—which also is a wreck and needs decluttering and an overhaul. Still, even in this mess, I commit to speak truth about the biggest mountain in my life that has yet to move.

*I wish my daughter wasn’t a Muslim.*

Wrong to say? Probably.

But elephants don't move if they can't see. They are shortsighted and deliberate. If things don't look clear and understandable and logical, they won't budge. Unless they get startled. Then, experts say, they go on a rampage.

And my home and hearth are messy enough already.

I long for logic and order and peace. And I long to talk. To finally look together at the reality of our life—and not end up arguing and slamming doors and yelling and walking away, especially without answers. Surely now—with almost ten years stuck in rubble—we finally can talk. Open and honest. But there's one problem.

My Christian daughter is a Muslim.

So how do we unclutter that? Every little piece of it. All the hard parts. The unexpected pieces. The curious twists and turns of struggling to live across faiths. Can't we clear all that up?

Should we even try?

My mother's heart tells me yes. Getting along but living divided has run its course. It's time to move higher.

Well, that's what my saved, sanctified, filled with the Holy Ghost, Bible-loving soul thinks I should say.

But how will Alana answer?

Will she go with me on this journey? Put her daughter's hand in mine? See where this path to truth and harmony takes us?

Or is she terrified, like me, to try?

Finally, I am ready to hear her answer.

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*Alana*

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Why am I a Muslim? It's the big question of my life—and the big conundrum for a mother and a father I love. But my answers aren't simple. And neither is my life. So as I sit in my dark bedroom considering this question, I look over at my husband, who fell asleep watching a UFC fight on the iPad, and hope that I won't have to walk my oldest daughter back to bed for the third time. It's late. I'm exhausted and ready for some peace and quiet.

After a day full of dental appointments for our four-year-old, our

two-year old, and me—because I’m pregnant again—plus waiting in the never-ending line at our local post office, I need a moment. But I can’t sleep just yet because I’m staring at my computer, trying to figure out a way to explain to my mother why I became a Muslim.

Her question doesn’t surprise me. I know that, although we smile and go along with our daily lives as if nothing is wrong, she will probably never be at peace with my decision. Still, I wonder if I will be able to talk to her about such an emotional issue.

My mother and I are really good at talking about easy stuff. Every time she calls, her usual questions are “How’re the kids?,” “How’s the hubby?,” and “How’s work?” And then I rattle off my own questions about what’s going on in her life. She informs me about Dad’s choir practice and her recent trip to Saver’s, the local thrift store, where she found some “practically new” outfit for a ridiculously low price. We laugh politely and then get off the phone. But we never talk about faith.

I don’t think I’m scared to talk to her about it. I just don’t know how to begin. I talk about faith all the time to Muslim friends. Even curious coworkers. I occasionally get questioned by parents and students at the elementary school where I teach fourth grade. The shy and reserved looks on their faces make it seem as if they are uncomfortable talking about my faith. I’m so used to the questions that I give automatic responses and make sure to be politically correct since I work in a public school. The kids mostly ask innocent questions based on what they see: “Why do you wear that thing on your head? Aren’t you hot?”

I remember one student, a third-grade girl, pulling me aside and whispering, “Are you bald under that scarf?” I grinned and politely replied, “I’m trying to be extra modest.” Or I may have said, “I wear loose-fitting clothing because it breathes easily.” My student smiled, looking uncomfortable, still staring at me in wonder.

If I can answer questions from someone else, why can’t I talk to my mother about my faith?

Most of the conversations with my mom are cut short anyway. I’m either on the way home from work and have to pick up the kids, or I already

have the kids, and they're screaming in my ear. We rarely have a decent amount of quiet, uninterrupted time to talk. Even during my visits to Colorado and her visits to Texas, the kids take up so much of our time and attention that there doesn't seem to be the time to just sit down and say, "So, Mom, wanna talk about why I became a Muslim?"

The opportunity just doesn't come up. I don't really mind it. In fact, I think I kind of like avoiding the topic. It all feels so controversial, and I am too tired from work and the kids to deal with controversy.

We've already endured enough drama since my conversion anyway. After I announced it, we didn't *talk*. We shouted, yelled, and debated for hours until I eventually shied away, realizing the downfalls of my naive approach to "convince" her. Embarrassed and ashamed, I allowed our relationship to evolve into one of polite denial. I pretended that there wasn't a divide forming between my mother and me, and I tried to keep in touch.

It was easy because we were apart—she in my native Colorado and me in Texas with my new husband. As a recent college grad, I was busy setting up my fifth-grade classroom. We would chat about my workload and the stress of being a first-year teacher. She would share about her church life and books. It was easy to pretend everything was okay—at least until she and my dad would visit. Then, somehow, the conversation would go in the direction of religion and eventually would erupt into a heated debate. A lot of words were spoken, hardly any of which were productive. We all were left feeling angry, frustrated, and exhausted.

One muggy summer night, in my tiny newlywed apartment, the authenticity of the Bible came up in our post-dinner discussion, and the conversation went downhill fast. Like a scene from an old Western, we all stared intensely across at each other, exhausted from the battle that had just occurred.

"Wait," my husband pleaded, as my parents got up to leave, unable to take any more arguing. "Don't leave like this," he said, holding out his hand to usher them back to the couch.

We sat in silence for a while, allowing our heartbeats to slow. The sounds of Houston's busy streets trailed in from the open patio door. I took a breath and calmed down and then looked back at my parents.

They stared at me with hurt and sadness in their eyes, and I knew that a rift would remain between us.

So, quietly, I decided to leave it alone, realizing that these arguments were destroying my relationship with my parents. The flare-ups arose less and less, and with the birth of my first child, a lovely distraction conveniently appeared.

And now we've actually agreed to talk about it, on paper at least, in a measured back-and-forth discussion. Surprisingly, it was my mother who initiated the idea. Maybe that was the necessary first step—to acknowledge that something has to change. That we can't just go on ignoring the matters that weigh down our hearts. Maybe I'm willing to talk now because, for once, my mother has actually asked the question. I don't recall her ever asking it before. In fact, I rarely remember her ever asking me about how I felt about these issues or my feelings about events in my life. And now she's asked me to discuss one of the most important aspects of my life, and the floodgates are open. So I've agreed to talk in this manner, knowing that it's time to address her concerns and confront our conflict head-on.

The time has flown by. It's been ten years since my conversion, and it's hard for me to understand how so much time could have passed without our sharing our feelings with each other about one of the most significant aspects of our lives.

Something inside me says yes, it needs to be done. Even if it means rehashing the uncomfortable, hurtful, and sometimes embarrassing past that has led up to this moment—when we finally talk.

But are we ready to receive what may come through those gates?

I hope I'm ready, and I hope this journey brings us closer. We have to give it a try.

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*Patricia*

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THROUGH THE GATES?

Well, the first thing was Ramadan—the annual Muslim fasting observance that lasts thirty days and thirty nights.