

Renee Shah
Lowell Student Speaker Series
February 8, 2011
“Sensitivity Training”

Seventy years ago, an organization openly despised people who practiced Islam. One day, members of this organization were at a riot. Amid the chaos, they killed a man. They killed him because they viewed him as an enemy. They killed him because he was Muslim.

When I was twelve, I heard this story from my grandfather. He was there when his friends murdered someone who did not share their faith. My grandfather has never been a violent man, but he remained actively involved in this anti-Muslim organization.

Hearing this story was the first time I learned that my grandfather was a racist. But I also knew that my grandfather grew up at a time when most people in India shared his views. When I heard this story, I considered turning my back on him to show him that I did not share his bias.

Instead, for these past 10 years, I have continued to build a relationship with him. He is a very religious man and has taught me about believing in God. He used to come to my travel soccer games and he would wake up at 6am to shovel snow off our driveway so that my mom could get to work.

He is now in his last leg of life, and he will die soon—as racist as he was 70 years ago. But he will not die without the love of his granddaughter. And I will not have to tell my children that I rejected their great-grandfather because he once shared an intimate detail of his life with me.

People’s life stories are more complicated than they may seem.

Through a volunteer program, I am a mentor for a 15 year-old inner-city girl named Kaila. She told me once she wants to be a single mother when she grows up. She does not believe in marriage. Kaila’s parents divorced when she was 5, and she claims she does not know of even one married couple. So I invited Kaila to meet a married couple—my parents—who have been happily married for 28 years. This experience—along with hours of conversation about relationships, compromise, sacrifice, and trust—have done nothing to change Kaila’s views.

It’s hard to overcome a childhood. But I’ve had a wonderful time getting to know Kaila. She’s the first person I call after an episode of Jersey Shore. She made me a better ice-skater last Christmas in Kendall Square.

I’ll never fully understand Kaila’s world view, but seeing her struggle has made me more sensitive to the grey area in all of our lives. We all have reasons for why we act the way that we do.

And understanding these reasons has helped me become more compassionate, more forgiving, and more patient than I used to be. Racial intolerance is difficult to deal with—and a tempting case for moral absolutism—but even here--seeing the shades of grey—getting to know my grandfather—has helped me view people with a little more nuance.

And I've also gotten to learn that my grandfather, despite his narrow views, worked alongside Gandhi and went to jail fighting for freedom in India. I see my grandfather as a lesson in contradictions. And it is my hope that my grandchildren will be patient with my contradictions. I can only hope that they will view my life holistically, and work to understand me in light of my strengths but also in light of my weaknesses.

Thank you.