



The One Defining Facet of My Life

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In this reflective personal essay, Christopher Wilson recounts learning to vilify and despise Islam during his career as a soldier, a disposition that would dramatically shift after reading the Qur'an in a World Thought class at USAO. This essay was written for Writing I with Dr. Brenda Brown.

DECIDING ON THAT ONE FACET of your life that defines you seems easy when you're 20 years old, but when you're 43 with a lifetime of experiences, it's a little tougher. In my life, I've been a foster child, a soldier, a journalist, a student, and so much more. Every experience in my life has turned me into the person I am today. I've led men in combat, and I've covered court room murder trials, but for most of my life, I was a soldier. Being a soldier was as much a part of my identity as my name or the color of my eyes. It's taken me years to realize and accept that I'm no longer a soldier and even longer to realize that I needed a college class, like World Thought II, to change my life. This is how an innocuous class helped me come to the realization that everything I had been taught and everything I grew up knowing was wrong.

Saying something "changed your life" is a dramatic statement and overused to the point that it's almost cliched; however, I proudly

use this phrase without remorse. For me to discuss how an interdisciplinary studies course and a couple of off-the-wall professors accomplished this consequential feat, I must first explain where I come from and how I wound up in the military, which, in turn, led me feel the way I did about Islam and Muslims.

I grew up poor. I was raised by adopted parents who made it clear from an early age that they didn't want me. I was picked on in school because of the cheap clothes I wore and the generic shoes on my feet. Because of this, as far back as I could remember, I wanted to be a soldier. I wasn't a war-hound. Nor did I have a desire to kill anyone. I wanted to be a hero, and outside of the Marvel Universe, who do we look at as heroes? Soldiers. In my mind, soldiers were infallible. Soldiers knew what to do in any situation, but most of all, soldiers had respect. Soldiers had everything I could never have.

Bootcamp is designed—from the moment you get off the bus and step on the yellow footprints till the day you graduate and earn the title Marine—to destroy whoever you thought you were. During the first few hours your head is shaved and all personal articles of clothing on your body, including your underwear, are taken from you. Pronouns like “I,” “you,” or “me” are replaced with “this recruit.” I was no longer Chris Wilson. I was recruit, maggot, worm, or dirt-bag, but so were my new peers. I was no longer an individual but a member of a platoon. For the first time in my life, my standing in society had nothing to do with who my family was, how much money we had, or brand of clothing I wore. I looked like everyone else. I had the exact same clothes as everyone else. The Marine Corps didn't care who I was or where I came from; I had the same opportunity for success or failure as everyone else. All I had to do was shut up and do what I was told. I thrived in this environment. I was finally able to succeed or fail based on my own merit. Because of this, I was very susceptible to the indoctrination of boot camp.

The drill instructors at boot camp are there to teach you to be a basic soldier, capable of operating within a small unit and surviving

in combat. You're taught to obey orders, without question or hesitation, even if it means you will lose your life. To accomplish this, drill instructors must instill in you a sense of invincibility as well as a clear understanding of who the enemy is.

During the early '90s, the United States had one main enemy: terrorism. From the 1983 Beirut bombing to the bombing of the World Trade Center in 1993, hijackings and the Battle of Mogadishu, it seemed terrorists were our greatest threat, and most terrorists just happened to be Muslim. So, it was easy for our instructors to point us like lean, mean, motivated missiles toward an enemy that was both vague and incredibly scary.

We didn't study the Qur'an or speak with Muslims. We watched videos of jihadists training in the desert or beheading innocent civilians. We learned that Muslims hated the West in general and America specifically. We came to understand that the only good Muslim was a dead Muslim. And. I. Soaked. It. Up.

These beliefs we reinforced in Somalia, but especially so on September 11, 2001, when Islamic terrorists attacked the United States, killing thousands. Since then, I've fought in Iraq and Afghanistan. I've led some of the finest men and women America has ever produced in combat. I've buried some of those same people, people whose deaths I blamed on all Muslims and not skewed foreign policies or less-than-accurate intelligence.

I carried these feelings throughout my career. For most of us, it was necessary to do our jobs in whatever zone we happened to be in so that we could hopefully come home. These feelings also justified, at least in my mind, necessary actions taken in order to protect my soldiers and myself. If the enemy was an evil jihadist, terrorist, or insurgent, I could sleep at night.

On February 7, 2007, after 14 years of service, I was medically retired from the Army. For most of my adult life I was Sergeant First Class Wilson. I was a platoon sergeant; I was father-figure to warriors; I was a disciplinarian; I was a soldier. On that day it was all taken away from me—not because of wounds in combat or anything

heroic, but because over the years of running and gunning, my back gave out on me. I no longer had an identity. I was right back where I was fifteen years earlier, but now I was also carrying memories of battles, of friends who didn't come home or who returned home less than whole. I questioned my decisions, the orders I gave or didn't give, but I never questioned who the enemy was until the Fall semester of 2018 at USAO.

For most students, the World Thought courses are a series of classes that every student is required to take. Unless you're a history major, these classes aren't very exciting, just a necessary nuisance to get through on your way to a degree in whatever. By this point I had already taken both World Thoughts I and III and wasn't looking forward to another semester of boring reading. I was especially concerned when I saw the course materials included the Qur'an. Why on earth would anyone, outside of the Middle East, want to read that thing? I mean, that's the holy grail of my enemy, the entire reason for the Crusades, 9/11, Beirut. That book was why my friends were dead. Because of that book, I had to sit in a funeral and listen to a three-year-old little girl tell her mom to go "wake daddy up." The Qur'an was, in my opinion, the reason for my hate, my anger, my depression, loss, and guilt. I couldn't wait to hear Drs. Simpson and Crow corroborate everything I *knew* about that book to my fellow classmates.

Then I began reading it.

I'm not going to explain every nuance or all the various similarities between Christianity and Islam, but suffice it to say, there are many. Simpson and Crow guided me through the history of Christianity and Islam, the connections, the parallels and the differences. They destroyed everything I held to be true, everything I believed in, in just a few short weeks. Not through propaganda or baseless assumptions: rather, they used facts, history, and the Qur'an itself. Drs. Crow and Simpson didn't laugh at me when I asked the inevitable questions regarding violence and Islam. The professors calmly pointed out the violence conducted in the name of Christianity,

which throughout history, has been just as violent, if not more so. I came to understand that violence isn't in the Qur'an. For years, I believed that terrorists justified their actions with their beliefs in the Qur'an, when in reality they were using historic and situationally dependent verses without context, a common trait among radical leaders from many religions

By the end of the semester, I felt better, almost enlightened. Maybe that's too strong a word, but at the very least, I had a different perspective. However, in some ways, I was also left more confused than ever before. Why were we fighting? Why did my friends die in what I thought was our generation's Great Crusade? The only answer I can come up with is extremism. We've seen the aftermath of extremists' views from Timothy McVey in Oklahoma City to the 9/11 attacks. Extremism isn't a monopoly of Islam.

Don't get me wrong. I'm proud of my service. The military gave me a home when no one else would and all they asked for in return was my best. I'm proud of what we accomplished and continue to accomplish. My service has given me opportunities that I never thought possible. Because of my service, I'm in college and will graduate with little to no debt. My service also gave me a horrible perspective that I never realized was wrong until I came to college. Kind of ironic, don'tcha think? Seriously though, I don't hate anymore, and for that I will forever be grateful. ►►