

## II. Reorientation

### STANFORD STUDENT Interview

**WELCOMED:** Welcomed is interested in how faith, culture, and moral inheritance shape a person's life at Stanford. How did your Muslim upbringing shape you, and what did that world look like when you were growing up?

**Stanford Student:**

I grew up in a very small, tightly knit Muslim community in Africa. My family is of South Asian descent, and our community traces its history there back to the nineteenth century. It began with fewer than a dozen families, and over generations it expanded as those families expanded. So I grew up in a world where every gathering had layers of family in it and it was almost impossible to feel alone.

That is one of the most beautiful things about my childhood. I always had cousins around me. I always had an aunt or uncle nearby, always another house to walk into, always someone making food, always someone inviting us over. Community shaped daily life. I grew up inside a structure of obligation and closeness. You were responsible to other people, you shared your life with them, and you belonged. That closeness gave me a sense of safety I did not fully appreciate until I left it.

My family is very observant. I think many Americans imagine that diaspora communities are very traditional and strict in America, but at home we are far stricter. Islam shaped our expectations and understanding of what a good life looked like. Religious practice has always been meaningful to me. I started fasting in stages when I was young. Our mother eased us into it with half-fasts, and I still remember the feeling of accomplishment that came with learning discipline that way. By the time I was nine, I was keeping the full month. Eid was always my favorite holiday. After a month of fasting, everyone came together for this huge, joyful celebration, and whatever struggles we'd encountered seemed unimportant.

Faith taught me kindness, responsibility, restraint, generosity, and the idea that you should try to leave the world more understanding than you found it. Those values still shape me.

**WELCOMED:** How did your life change as you moved into a more diverse school environment?

**Stanford Student:**

As I grew older, I became more aware that I did not fit the mold that seemed to structure so much of the world around me. I was a queer kid in a deeply traditional Muslim setting. I knew there was something about me that refused to align with the future people imagined for me. That

created a strange tension, because I loved my community. I began to wonder whether the love I had always known would remain if everyone knew everything about me.

One of the great gifts of my life was moving to an international high school. It was the first time I had really stepped outside the small world in which I had grown up. The school was diverse, full of people from many countries and many backgrounds, and for me it felt like a kind of opening. It was not perfect, but it gave me something I had not had before: a space where people could be more fully themselves.

That was where I first came out to friends. It was also where I had trusted adults around me, a few teachers who knew and made me feel that I was not carrying everything alone. Realizing that I was queer has been the central challenge in my life. When I came out to my family halfway through high school, they needed time to understand and accept that my future might be harder than they wished for me. Only my immediate family knows and they have loved me through it. They came to terms with it slowly, but genuinely.

**WELCOMED:** Have you found a way of holding your two identities together at Stanford?

**Stanford Student:**

I do not think queerness and Islam should be in conflict. I understand where the tension comes from. I know what the tradition says in many of its inherited forms. I know that many people understand faith primarily in terms of rule-following, and that queerness seems, from within that definition, like a violation of the life you are meant to lead. But I do not think faith is reducible to the narrowest and most punitive version of following every rule.

Rather, Islam offers me a moral core: kindness, care, justice, and the effort to put good into the world. The values I was raised with tell me how to treat people. They tell me that dignity matters. They tell me that cruelty is a failure. They tell me that love and responsibility are paramount.

My task is to refuse the idea that there is only one rigid way to be Muslim. I am still working that out. I am cautious about my identity, and I am careful about what I make public, in part because I want to protect my future. But inwardly, I do not experience this as a choice between faith and selfhood. I experience it as an ongoing effort to live with integrity inside both.

Coming to Stanford was much harder than I expected. From the outside, it looked like a dream: a new country, a prestigious university, more freedom, more possibility. But when I got here, old problems were newly challenging. I have struggled with anxiety for a long time, and back home I had a kind of recipe for managing it. I had my family, my routines, my familiar spaces, the

people who knew how to notice when I was not okay, the quiet structures that held me up without me having to explain myself. At Stanford, that whole world disappeared at once.

That absence hit me harder than I anticipated. I fell into a depressive period, and my anxiety worsened. Part of the difficulty was that my old sources of grounding failed to translate. I did not have my mother nearby. Nor all the ordinary objects and habits that made me feel safe. The cultural and familial world that had always anchored me was far away. When you leave home, people often talk as though freedom is the main story. But for me, the more important experience was the sudden loss of structure, closeness, and recognition.

Stanford is not prepared to support that kind of struggle. It is a university that speaks constantly about wellness and belonging, but when students actually need sustained care, the support can feel thin, delayed, and bureaucratic. I needed stable relationships and people who understood. For students with layered identity struggles that include faith, migration, queerness, anxiety, homesickness, and family expectation all at once, the gap becomes glaring.

At the same time, I have found friends here who have helped me see continuity in my life here. I am still the same kid who was raised in a world of close family and thick tradition. I am formed by Muslim values and by the experience of loving a community even when I do not fit it perfectly. I am also someone who has found, here in the United States, other people who understand what it means to live identities that are often treated as contradictory. That continuity gives me hope.

If I were speaking to a first-year student who was both Muslim and queer, I would say this: you do not have to let the institution tell you what your struggle means. You are neither failing nor alone because transition is hard, and because the official structures are inadequate. Find the people who are interested in your life with its complexities. Keep what is life-giving in your tradition. Let yourself mourn what you have lost without deciding that everything is lost. It may take time, but a coherent life is possible. Build, as slowly as you need to, a circle of people who care about who you are and who you hope to become.