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Dear, Parents:

On behalf of all my Muslim brothers and sisters born or raised in America, I thank you for all that you sacrificed when you immigrated here leaving behind your friends, your family, and all that you ever loved in your past life purely for the investment in and betterment of your children's livelihoods. My mother often reminds me of what a staff member at my pre-school once said to her only months after immigrating from Bangladesh to a cosmopolitan neighborhood in Harlem. Something like "the children of immigrants reap the benefits of their parent's sacrifice." I know that it often seems as though the difficulties you endured to give us the best shot at life go right over our heads. For that I apologize even though you deserve much more than an apology. Secondly, I thank you for endowing us with the beautiful religion of Islam. Although often misrepresented by the media and misunderstood by our society, I cannot stress how grateful I am for the role religion has played in my life. But to be blatantly honest, although Islam is at the epicenter of the newfound solace and comfort in my life it was once something I despised and was embarrassed of. I regret to inform you that I was not the only one who felt this way about our faith. Insecurities and misconceptions about Islam are plaguing Muslim American youth like never before. I feel compelled to inform you of this for one particular reason. Often, we portray to our parents a fabricated version of the truth in order to avoid confrontation, scolding, and bouts of long lectures. I want to open your eyes to what could be going on right under your noses because I believe the solution to the problem lies with you.

To explain as to why or how the solution lies with you, it is necessary for me to reveal just how damaging this pent-up animosity or embarrassment of one's own religion can be. My personal account of losing faith can provide some clarity as to what needs to change. When I was younger, I felt as though I had experienced life like a dog on a leash. My parents showered me with affection but were much stricter religiously than the parents of my non-Muslim friends. Now, having matured, I realize their protective nature came out of love but when I was a kid, I mistook it for overbearing, harsh, and unnecessary. My parents never explained religion in context of it being the purpose of my life and instead bestowed it upon as more of a cultural burden. Being a Muslim was something I had to be because it was a part of my heritage. With hopes of escaping my life at home I applied to an out-of-state private school and convinced my parents to let me attend when I gained admission. When I attended boarding school in New England, I would have found myself to be alienated had I fully embraced my religion and culture. And so, my desire to assimilate and fit in with the rest of my graduating class mixed with my desire to rebel from the strict life I was accustomed to back home led me to live in complete contradiction to the teachings of Islam. Within my first month at Phillips Exeter Academy, I became a daily user of marijuana and nicotine. I drank my heart out every weekend and even started eating pork. I went from being every Muslim parent's "dream" and praying five times a day at the mosque to every parent's nightmare no matter their religious affiliation. For the next four years of my life, I would struggle with my sobriety. The physical distance I had put between my family and faith led me to have a distant relationship with my parents as well. Noura Badawi, an educator trained in Teachers College at Columbia University captures my situation in the following quote, "Muslim teenagers are very conflicted; they have a need to assimilate, but they also have a strong desire to please their parents and their community," she said. "Sometimes the

pressure is so great that the teenagers go the complete opposite direction or break free by moving away as soon as an opportunity comes up." ¹

As parents you may find your heart racing having read the aforementioned quote. You may be scratching your heads trying to figure out what you can do to either prevent such a thing from ever occurring or how to remedy the situation if you suspect something similar is happening to one of your own. The simple answer to that is to do one key thing differently: help your kids understand the greater purpose of Islam itself. Often many Muslim parents make the costly mistake of treating religion similar to that of a language, held onto to preserve heritage and followed because it is all we know. When you box religion into such confines it is extremely difficult for those of us who were raised in the west to remain loyal to something we are persecuted for. With islamophobia still being a major problem in the United States, it is vital you help us realize the benefits of enduring such prejudice from our peers. Make them understand that Allah will reward us in the afterlife. I turned back to Islam when I began having existential thoughts and remembered life is supposed to be difficult if I want to the ultimate reward of heaven. Only then did I decide to embrace my faith in a society that views it under a negative light because I saw the hardship as a worthwhile investment in my afterlife. In the Qur'an we are constantly reminded that life is a test but something in the Qur'an we tend to read over is that children are a test for their parents.

“Your children are but a trial, and Allah has with Him a great reward.” *Qur'an, Surah At-Taghabun, 64: 15*)

¹ Badawi, Noura. “American Muslim Teenagers: Torn between Religion and Culture.” *Teachers College - Columbia University*, 21 Dec. 2008, <https://www.tc.columbia.edu/articles/2008/december/american-muslim-teenagers-torn-between-religion-and-culture/>.

Sincerely,
Shahat Alam