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Commentary

## Blending Cultures in the Melting Pot

by Eboo Patel

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All Things Considered, June 4, 2008 · At 3 a.m., the baby is still crying. My wife has been up for hours trying to calm him.

Finally, she hands him to me and says, "Your turn. Do something."

I am unpracticed at this. I try to hold him, but his head rolls off my forearm. I try to rock him, but it feels more like a rattling.

"Sing to him," my wife calls from the bedroom. I start in on the first song that comes to mind:

I've roamed and rambled and I've followed my footsteps/

To the sparkling sands of her diamond deserts/

And all around me a voice was sounding/

This land was made for you and me.

I remember learning this song 22 years ago, for the fifth-grade play at Park View Elementary School. It's a song that belongs to me, to every pebble and person in this country. A song that belongs now to my son Zayd, too.

When my wife and I give Zayd a bath, she prays the Shahada while sponging his face. It is the Muslim declaration of faith — La ilaha Illah Allah Muhammad Rasulullah — there is no god but God, and Muhammad is his messenger.

And when my mother-in-law visits, she speaks to Zayd in Gujarati, the language of his Indian ancestors.

"Kem cho?" she says when she picks him up. "How are you?"

This is how our son will be raised — with American folk songs, Muslim prayers and Indian salutations. He is all smiles and burps at this stage, absorbing it all effortlessly. But I remember a time when I thought those three traditions could only ever be at war, and the battleground was within me.

I grew up being an American at school, an Indian at home and a Muslim in the prayer hall. I couldn't stand it when my mother packed samosas and mangoes in my lunch box. It was the food of foreigners. I secretly hoped that Ramadan, the Muslim month of fasting, would never come. I had no idea how to explain it to the kids at school. Having pungent food in my lunch was bad enough, but not eating at all for religious reasons made me a total outcast.

I started to wish that the parts of me that were India and Islam would disappear altogether. I was ashamed of them — they were preventing me from being American.

I remember the moment my idea of America expanded: It was in college, when my friend Jeff handed me books of American poetry.

Reading Walt Whitman was like traveling to a whole new country.

"I am large," Whitman wrote, speaking for both himself and his nation. "I contain multitudes."

Discovering Langston Hughes was like finding a power I never knew I had: "America never was America to me/And yet I swear this oath— America will be!"

America's poets gave me a place in this nation, and the permission to push it towards its potential.

My son fell asleep that night to Woody Guthrie songs. I placed him back in his crib and whispered the Shahada in his ear. He, too, will sing America — in Indian languages, Arabic prayers and the poetry of possibility.

*Eboo Patel is the executive director of the Interfaith Youth Core and the author of Acts of Faith. He lives in Chicago.*

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