

## **Shared Joys and Sorrows**

Riding a two-wheeler into independence. Savoring the birth of a first grandchild. Grieving the loss of a family pet. Soothing a crying child at a religious service.

Are these practices unique to Muslims, Christians or Jews alone? Of course not. They are universal, developmental, ordinary – even normal, joyful, and tinged with sorrow. Plus, they are shared by people of all faiths.

But there is a twist. People don't observe and feel the common humanity embodied in these events. In fact, stereotyping of each faith often leads to distorted, dehumanized views of the others. "People are not like me" leads to "they are less than I am."

Nowhere is it more evident in US views of Muslims. In fact, a recent Gallup World Poll resulted in a book, Who Speaks for Islam. This massive survey examined degrees of prejudice Americans feel toward a number of faith groups. A key point relevant to Shared Joys and Sorrows is: "Of the four faith groups, Americans were more than twice as likely to report negative feelings towards Muslims, than Buddhists, Christians or Jews."

Increasing quality, human level contacts between people of different faiths is one strategy to reduce "monolithic" lumping together of followers of these faiths. "Monolithic Islam" is a myth which tends to stigmatize Muslims into two broad camps, moderates and terrorists. Lumping any group into general categories effectively reduces the humanity of an individual, often opening up the illogical view that "I am superior because I am more human than they are."

Worldwide, as reported in Who Speaks for Islam, Muslims say the one thing the West can do is to improve relations with their societies is to moderate their views towards Muslims and respect Islam.

Even in Colorado, "the stereotyping of Islam, and the spread of religious fear has already cost many Muslims their livelihood." Tajuddin goes on to say that "this is an important issue that should be handled responsibly and with care." Colorado's Muslim Council advocates for dialogue based on mutual respect and sincere desire to dispel misconceptions and bigotry through public education.

So, how do we educate communities of our shared humanity? Universally, we all yearn for lives that matter, to have lives with respect given and received, and want to build a better world for our children and grandchildren.

Empathy for others and life experiences come more easily through storytelling, which blends compelling images with conversational language.

Shared Joys and Sorrows proposes to do just that. Our photo / documentary exhibit will feature 12 “incredibly normal” life events in the lives of ordinary people from each of the Abrahamic faiths. A starter list includes:

- First Steps
- First Lost Tooth
- First Skill Mastered
- Fitted for Glasses
- First Grandchild
- First Birthday
- Braces / Retainer Installed
- Report Card Grade
- First Day of School
- Preparing / Serving a Meal
- Donating to Charity
- Cast (first broken arm)
- Sharing a special holiday meal
- Worshiping together
- Loss of Pet
- Loss of Grandparent
- Loss of Child

Accompanying these powerful images will be words by individuals going through these landmarks.

The exhibit will be on display at high traffic locations which guarantee a wide swath of people of all walks of life, faiths, and personal circumstances. Yet, all will be able to identify with the life moments portrayed in the images and stories behind them. We offer that the birth of a first grandchild, death of a close relative, even family pet, and first steps of a child are affecting and easy to document, and are similarly touching to members of all faiths. No faith has a lock on empathy. All faiths have suffered from the evils of prejudice and stereotyping.

One objective is to have viewers exclaim, “I never thought about it that way!” Another is to open their minds and move them to act on this insight. Accompanying literature and website references will enable them to continue their experience with others from different faiths at a personal level.

Will this be the end of prejudice, stereotyping and bigotry? Of course not. Is it a fresh, untried approach based on past successes of the Milestones Project in promoting mutual understanding and respect? Yes, it is.

When the Milestones Project received the Peace & Tolerance Award on International Human Rights Day, a UN official commented on what we do and why it is so important and timely. Dr. Ndiaye eloquently said “It is precisely the universality of the human experience that binds us together, and the denial of that shared experience that tears us apart. This Project reminds us that, while we are all marvelously different in some ways, in every way that truly matters, we are all equal.” (Dr. Bacre Waly Ndiaye represents the High Commissioner of Human Rights at the United Nations.)

A word about storytelling. Nicholas Kristof of the New York Times recently was interviewed by Mother Jones magazine. He was asked “What do you think is the best way to get people to care about human rights issues?” Guilt tripping was ruled out. Individual storytelling is “incredibly powerful with emotional stories ‘opening the portals’ and that once there is a connection made, people are open to rational arguments / discussion.” Kristof advocates for a “connection of empathy” so that rational arguments can play a supportive role.

Finally, Personalize It is the key to marketing success and storytelling is the “new marketing” according to Blake Mycoskie, founder of the socially responsible and highly celebrated business, TOMS shoes.

### Budget Assumptions

- 12 Life Moments of Joy and Sorrow
- 3 Participating families representing each Abrahamic faith
- Conversational quotes on vinyl banners
- Introductory – explanatory – credit banners

### Budget Items

36 24” x 36” photographic prints with ½” black foam board		\$4,320
15 vinyl banners		\$1,875
Writing / Interviewer		\$1,200
Design		\$2,000
Photography coordination / management		<u>\$5,000</u>
	Total	\$14,395
5% contingency		<u>\$720</u>
	<b>Total (USD)</b>	<b>\$15,115</b>

### Hoped For Participation by the Faith Community

- Agree to endorse the program.
- Consent to locating families who give their permission to “tell their story” through photographs and words (they receive a set of photos taken of their family at no cost).
- Provide \$5,000 towards program costs.

### Contact Information

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