Enough

I sat at the dinner table enjoying the big smiles, loud laughs, and wonderful Afghan food with family friends I had known since childhood. The aroma of steamed mantu and kebabs filled the air, as the mother wished me happiness in my future endeavors.

When I look back at that moment a year later, the irony hits me: it should have been *me* wishing *her* the best. A month after we shared that dinner, the Mateen family was in national headlines. But they were described not as the loving people I knew; instead, they were the family of the Orlando Pulse Nightclub shooter, Omar Mateen.

As I sat stunned watching the news, that jovial celebration was a distant memory. I began to question my community, my moral obligations, and my emotional status. How, in the blink of an eye, had a kind mother become the mother of a terrorist?

That fateful shooting occurred on June 12, 2016, during Ramadan the summer before my junior year. My family had awakened as is customary for suhoor, when Muslims eat before sunrise to prepare for a day of fasting. As we ate, my father turned on the news only to hear of a suspected “terror attack” in Orlando, less than two hours from where we lived. We had become desensitized to such news: a suspect with a stereotypically Islamic name would be announced, followed by a barrage of attacks on the faith and threats to our religious freedoms as Muslims. To avoid the frustration of hearing our religion vilified as violent and oppressive, we usually just sighed and turned to other matters.

But on this occasion, I never expected to hear that the terrorist was a member of the family we knew well, a family my community had grown to love. I felt numb, as if I were living in an alternate reality. I replayed every moment I had shared with the Mateen family. I needed to explain how it all happened – and to understand my emotions: I feared repercussions our community might face, and I also empathized deeply with those that suffered and lost their lives.

As news anchors flooded our mosque and community centers and classmates questioned me about my ties with the Mateens, I struggled to find some way to make even a minor difference and set things right. But because the task seemed so impossible, I became immobilized.

Three months later, on September 11, 2016, when I thought the situation couldn’t get any worse, we found our mosque, the one we attended with the Mateens, burning at the hands of an arsonist. This violence finally drove me to action. Four days later, I helped organize a vigil in the burned backyard of the mosque where I had learned peace and acceptance.

The night of the vigil, more than 100 people held signs and candles as beacons of hope. Seeing Muslims, non-Muslims, and strangers of all ethnicities, I felt tears slipping down my face. But I wiped them away because I had a role to play for unity and against ignorance. As a human and Muslim, I had a moral obligation to unify my Florida community and teach others my understanding of the truths of Islam. Following local officials who spoke in solidarity with the Muslim community, I stepped onto the podium.

I know I said a number of things on that podium: some of which I now look back on and cringe. Things like “Muslims aren’t all alike,” and “I’m only one example of Muslim girls in America who refuses to conform to ‘norms’ suggested by the media.”

I ended as the person most quoted in the media. Back then, as a highschooler, as I saw my words sprawled across articles, I knew I had made an impact. I realized the power of words, the responsibility I held to dispel misconceptions, and my capability to forgive and grow.

However, as I flashforward to today, my experiences as a first generation Indian Muslim woman, have exhausted me. I no longer view it as my “moral obligation to unify my community” and “teach others my understanding of the truths of Islam.” I no longer feel the need to feed the media the cliches they wish to hear. I simply feel the need to be unapologetically me. That should be enough. It is enough.