



Easter Attack Survivors Project presents

# To Live and To Learn

*Stories from the Human Library*

# Acknowledgements

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**The Easter Attack Survivors Project (EASP)** is a platform that was initiated to memorialize the lives we lost, as well as those that survived the tragic Easter attack that struck Sri Lanka on the 21st of April 2019.

The EASP team works towards raising awareness of the survivor community and contributing to reconciliation and peace-building efforts in Sri Lanka through advocacy via story-sharing and conducting educational workshops and training sessions across the country.

EASP comprises more than 40 volunteers and is a project of the Sri Lanka Reconciliation Movement (SLRM).

# What was the Human Library?

This was not a formal panel discussion.

The Human Library is a library of people. It is a concept that was initiated in Denmark where participants were able to borrow individuals contributing as *open books* to have conversations they would not normally have access to.

Our objective was to have a very personal, one-to-one conversation with Sri Lankans from all religious communities. This was also not a “remembrance” event of the Easter Sunday attack. It was a gathering of people from diverse backgrounds engaging with the problem of peace and reconciliation (among others) and sharing their perceptions as well as the way forward for it in the context of Sri Lanka.

It is our belief that conversations of this caliber is an imperative part of the process of understanding and achieving reconciliation.

# Just Incidents!

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What happened to me on the 21st of April 2019, was that it was supposed to be a better Sunday than usual, because it was my husband's cousin's wedding, and my daughter was to be the **flower girl**. So, I woke up, very excited with the fancy dress and all the makeup and all sorted, only to realize that there had been multiple bombings all over Colombo and the outskirts.

Initially, I thought this was a terrible joke, and then I *wished* it was a terrible joke.

Apart from this, one thing that hit me hard, was what happened to my son. I don't know whether he remembers, he's here. At the time, he was at a big public school with all faiths in there. He was born post-2009, which is after the end of the Civil War.

He's of a generation that has not experienced any racial violence, hate, discrimination, nothing. It's an amazing era to be born in, right?

So, one day, he comes home **very upset**, almost crying. One of these kids have literally told him that it is his fault that these people died. At that time, I don't think I even explained to them in detail what happened.

So, I had to sit with my nine- and seven-year-old children and explain to them what happened. What discrimination is, what bullying is, and how to stand up for themselves.

Now, this was excruciatingly painful. This incident, hit me quite hard. But what I felt was that it was not even close to what the survivors have gone through. So what? These are **just incidents**, right, so what?

# The Birthday Boy...

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The 21st of April was the date that I was born. It was also going to be my 3-month-old son's first trip at that time, and I wanted to make it as **special as possible**.

I took them all to Galle. When we were going to check out of the hotel, we realized that curfew had been imposed all over the country because of the bombings. I was shocked and taken aback. Not knowing what exactly to do because of the stigma surrounding being a Muslim, it really wasn't a good feeling having to leave the hotel early.

I don't exactly identify as a Muslim, however. But then again, that's **the identity** I was born with, so, I had to go with it.

I eventually came to Colombo and immediately took to social media to announce that I condemned the actions.

At that time, I didn't know for sure that it was **Muslims** who actually did it. I thought it could have been a misdirection, purposefully spread by extremists. You never know, right? Rumors could spread.

Slowly, more and more truths came out. And we realized that, you know, a lot of influential people were involved in this. And that was very, very **painful**. These were **educated** people. **It ruined it for all of us**. We watched as the violence climbed and became worse. We were all living in fear. And it was also partly our responsibility.

# Look At Your Schools!

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One day I was chatting with one of my “school principal” friends. We were discussing **racism** and what had happened to our country, you know. And the Principal of a well-known Government boys’ school said, “I can take care of the boys from grade six to twelve, **but not three to five**”. It was shocking! He said, “Among these young students some very racist comments were passing”.

In my daughter’s school, I see something **beautiful** though. During the Islamic day, the entire choir is from the Christian community. And they are doing a wonderful job, singing Islamic songs and all. It reminded me of the time when the refugees from Turkey were welcomed by Canada! The Canadian people sang *Tala’al Badru* to welcome these refugees – an Islamic song that was sung more than 1400 years ago to welcome the Holy Prophet to Medina.

This gave me **goosebumps**, you know. How are these students doing this so well, the pronunciation and everything? We should not restrict that at schools, you know, or else, we can **never go further**.

# Oya Muslim Neh? (*You are Muslim right?*)

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We had a few incidents. Very, very small incidents, but it sort of **hits you**. One of it was the **multiple tuk rejections**. At the time, I was wearing the hijab, so it looked like I was Muslim. Now I don't, and everybody thinks I'm Burgher. I stop them and they're like, "*Oya Muslim neh?*", and then drives off.

I'm like, "Okay, then why did you even stop? You can see my hijab, no?" A lot, maybe five, six in a day during that period. Then I decided I'm not going to take **public** transport for a while.

So, when I came home, I used to tell these stories to my husband, he told me to take it with a *pinch of salt*. The same way that he handled rejection by girls with a pinch of salt. So that's what happened. We laughed about it and moved on.



# It's Not Just Muslims...

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There are other organizations as well. We saw what happened in Christchurch, perpetrated by a non-Muslim against the Muslims. We've seen the LTTE also indoctrinating people to join a Tamil cause. We've seen so many other groups **indoctrinating** people to take up causes. They go on and do it in the name of a **religion**.

Now, this is the problem that we face today. People doing certain actions **in the name of a religion**. It's not just Islam. We've heard of Jospheh Kony from the LRA. LRA stands for Lord's Resistance Army in Africa. And then we've got Boko Haram which is another representative of an Islamist organization, and we've got the KKK, which is a white supremacist group.

We've got **many organizations**, like this. And this is the problem - it's not religious-centric. But it is a problem where there are certain people with ulterior motives indoctrinating others to take up a stance following the ideas that they impose, and then **commit actions** in the name of the religion.

They've **hijacked** a certain religion or a certain agenda. And they have created problems by indoctrinating others, by creating third parties to be their representatives. I hope there will be more **conversations on this topic**.

# Buwanekabahu the 6th

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After the news of the explosions, I went to my mum's house to check on her. I found her in the kitchen, **on the floor, crying**. I was taken aback, and then I remembered. A little backstory about my Muslim parents is that they are from **Jaffna**. They were chased out by the LTTE. They relocated to Colombo, leaving everything. That was in their **prime**. They had to start everything from the bottom up after they came to Colombo.

So, when she heard **this** news, she was reliving all those traumatizing events. That was a little too much for her to bear. I asked her, "Why are you sad, what's happening"? She told me that every time there's lightning or thunder, she gets scared, because she remembers the shelling, and the fire falling on top of them. Now, I cannot just tell you something and then stop without giving a solution.

So, in my perspective, what I think will be a sustainable solution for this problem is to **teach our children history**. I mean, not the way that we are taught history *now*. If I asked you **which Buwanekabahu** invaded Jaffna, most of you can tell me that Buwanekabahu the 6th invaded Jaffna. That is what is questioned in the history paper. But who cares if Buwanekabahu the 5th invaded Jaffna, or Buwanekabahu the 6th invaded Jaffna? *Some* Buwanekabahu invaded Jaffna!

What is important for us to do is ask different questions. **Why did Buwanekabahu invade Jaffna?** What did the people there feel? Has this happened before in history? Why didn't Buwanekabahu the 4th invade Jaffna? Critically analyzing history is probably the way for us to understand on a very basic level, what the other person feels.

# The Journalist

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In 2014, I was a **journalist** that was working for Ceylon Today, and I covered a story. Now back then, you might remember there was a lot of violence in mosques and churches. Muslims were the highlight during that time, **even though the churches were also attacked**. So, I worked on a story of extremism because this came in the backdrop of Wijeyadasa Rajapaksa saying at that time, that certain Muslims had left the country to join ISIS.

In light of that, I did a story about **Islamic radicalization** in Kattankudy. This story, however, never got published. But then again, around that time, there were other such stories that were published. So, although I did not travel to Kattankudy, I had a little bit of information about what was happening.

When the Easter Sunday attack happened, I realized that there was an issue that needed to be addressed immediately. Back then, in 2014, I saw it with a bias. I did not realize that this could be a problem. When it happened in 2019, I realized that this was going to be a problem that we needed to address because **self-radicalization** is a problem that we still hadn't figured out how to resolve.

There needs to be something done about the ideas of certain groups, it's not just ISIS, there is now the issue of **Wahhabism** as well. Many of us have heard it is an issue, but we need to be talking about it and **addressing** it as well. If there is extremism, we need to **talk** about it, we need to make sure that our rehabilitation programs are in place.

# Hearts in a dome

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I was just a young girl at home when we heard the news. That happened early morning. By night so much had happened, and it was **only then** that we were hearing that it was probably Muslims who were responsible for this. That was a news article from Daily Mirror. I remember my brother telling this to all of us, and I was like, “why is Daily Mirror trying to be **racist at this point**”?

When it was confirmed that Muslims had done this, our minds were **blown**. At that time, I was hoping to be an artist. The very next day, I wanted to publish something on my Instagram. A piece of art that **I had created** to show how appalled I was by this attack. I remember I drew a dome of a mosque and inside the dome of the mosque, I drew tiny **colorful hearts, and I filled the dome** with these hearts. I wanted to show that all the Muslims feel for the Christians right now. We have so much of love for them, and we are **so sorry that this happened**.

At the bottom of the dome, there was a line **from left to right** to seal it, but I left it slightly opened in one corner. Through this drawing, I had shown that this is the whole Muslim community filled with so much of love and sorrow; but, there's this tiny, tiny 0.1% of Muslims who have gone **out of that dome** - who aren't Muslims - we don't **recognize them as Muslims anymore**.

That was my viewpoint **then**, but now it has changed. I feel like my viewpoint at that point was wrong. Because what I was doing was **pushing** those Muslims away from my community and saying they are **not us**. But now I think they are **Muslims, too**. They *identified* as Muslims, so who are we to say “No, you guys aren't Muslims”. These guys are Muslims. We must figure out what went wrong. and how to prevent Muslims or some other community doing that again; instead of easily pushing them out and being **in denial** of what happened.

# A Catholic Perspective

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Usually, on Sunday mornings we sometimes go to church. There's mass at different times. On that day, I invited my friends to come over for Easter lunch. We were getting ready to go. Obviously, we weren't **watching the news** or anything at that time. My friends were the ones who were supposed to come home, they were the ones that called and told me, "They're **bombing churches**, don't go to church".

At first, I was taken aback, "Is this a joke? Why?" The war was long gone, and all of that. So, at first, I really didn't want to **believe it**. But, you know, after that, we **had to**. I was a teacher at the Church for the Sunday school sessions. Going to church after that, there was always the bag checking.

At first, we weren't even allowed bags into the church. A lot of changes did happen.

What made things worse was our Muslim friends' guilt over something they didn't do.

We have had a lot of Muslim friends since childhood who are very close to us up to now. We felt bad because they would call us on Easter, and they would make sure we were okay. They would say sorry. My question was, "Why do you feel sorry?" "You didn't do anything."

# Fighting for God

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When this horrible violent act happened, I was in **Jaffna**. As you know, we were expecting and preparing for the **worst-case** scenario. Inter-religious conflict is a serious issue. Imagine we are conflicting over an object, suppose a piece of **property**. We have a fight, and after some time, we'll seek to **compromise**.

I will say, “It's okay, you can keep this”, or you may say “It's okay, let's do that”. The conflict will end spontaneously or die down. **But with inter-religious conflict**, man thinks that he's fighting on **behalf of God**. History has shown us that when we fight in the name of God, we never compromise.

# The Guilt

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Initially, I started off being angry. Then frustrated. Then I lost hope, because after surviving the Civil War, to come to this, it was **tragic**. But soon, after all this fear, anger, everything, one thing that was constant was the feeling of guilt. **Why guilt?** Because all these perpetrators were Muslims and are Muslims like the previous book said. They may not obviously follow what we follow, which is peace, but nevertheless, they were termed as Muslims.

So, when I say guilt, I always felt – **till to date**, I feel that we could have done more. As a community, we could have done more. Of course, this is a **controversial** viewpoint, and many others may be against it.

Now, slowly, after a few weeks, after the curfews and all of that, I felt something else. In addition to the anger, lost hope, and guilt, there was fear. Why fear?

Because every Muslim, every Muslim woman, man, and child was targeted. Whether you wear the hijab, whether your surname is a Muslim name even though you follow another religion, whether you're a child, it didn't matter. You were targeted by the media, social media, and by people on the street.

One of my workplaces is an **Anglican** institution. I walked in with so much fear that at the entrance I was literally tearing!

I remember one thing, my boss and my colleagues **sat me down** and reminded me that my identity is so precious and that it shouldn't be tarnished by a few people. **Through this**, I found the **strength**, to move on. I am not even related to a victim of the Easter attack, and this is what I felt. That is where my interest to work with them began.

# Backpacks and Churches

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We started off in 2020. We were just volunteers, and we thought, “Okay, how do we bridge this **religious gap?**” So, we brought in the notion of interfaith. We had ideas of reconciliation, peace building, harmony processes, all of that. When we look back to the Civil War, we realized that there's a lot of documentation, information, and in books, and people don't read books anymore unfortunately. The emerging generation likes little videos that they can **retain**.

We decided we were going to go to the affected victims and their families and we were going to speak to them and document their stories in video. That's how we formed. We first visited the Katuwapitiya Church in Negombo. The experience there was **amazing**. Father Prasad helped us gather survivors so that we can just have a conversation with them like this. We entered the church with Aamina top to toe in black. We had to tell her to leave her laptop backpack in the vehicle because with a backpack, it was even scarier.

We enter the church thinking “Oh my gosh, they're going to kill us”, that's the word we used. We asked the Fathers, “Are they going to kill us? and he was like, “We don't know, maybe”. He was just joking with us. So, we walked in, and **nothing**. People approached us and spoke to us. It was so amazing that we were **shocked**. Personally, being a Muslim, I feared Muslims. I feared a person wearing a hijab. I feared people **wearing backpacks**.

To date, I have that phobia. I am so **afraid of a backpack**. Even recently, I was at a hotel, and I saw this man wearing a backpack and I just got this *instant fear*. That is so ingrained that it's so difficult to understand how the victims themselves were **okay** with it. We spoke to many victims and survivors. I'm going to give you a couple of stories, something that really hit me.



# A Storm in the Cemetery

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Susantha lost his entire family. His wife and three kids. His **youngest daughter** was afraid of thunder and lightning. He speaks to us as if they're **present**, as if they're here.

So, when it rains, when there's any thunder, lightning, rain, whatever it is, he will **stop working**, and run to the cemetery, **with an umbrella**.

He'll sit **next** to his youngest daughter and comfort her. This hurt. Hearing this, *really hurt*.

# Seven to Nine Pillows

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Anusha **lost seven members** of her family. Her husband and all her children. She started off as a very normal person without any sort of riches. She said that she started off with a push cycle. Then they got a motorbike. Slowly, she and her husband **built themselves** up and they eventually bought a vehicle, a house, and they had a **home** of lovely children.

She told me “Listen, I’m not bothered about my children getting the best marks or doing well in sports. I am just a homemaker. I love my children, and I don’t mind them being **who they are**”.

She spoke so simply, but her love for them is beyond what I can imagine. She told me, “**Imagine**. When you have everything right in front of you?

Everything - a beautiful family, a house, a car, all of that. With the **click of a finger**, it **all goes away**; what do you do? What do you expect me to do? Can I move on? Everyone encourages me to move on. But how can I move on? I didn't have answers, I still don't have answers. She cannot sleep alone. She needs **seven to nine pillows** around her. She's traumatized all the time.

One of our key concerns as a team was about **re-victimization**. Are we going to drag them back into what happened? I said we’re so sorry that we have to put you through this again and again. You know what she said? She told me, “I go through this **every second** of my life. There is no re-victimization here. There can never be the re-victimization because I live it, breathe it, every single day.

# Being a Tamil

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I was traveling by **train** from **Jaffna**. I was looking at my phone when I learned about the bombings. When the war ended, I was very small. Honestly, I can't remember much of it, except for the stories my parents and elders have related. So, I haven't personally been affected.

Because of that, I'm not in a position to imagine what happened on that terrible day. Suddenly I keep **getting calls** from my family to get off at the next station and head back to Jaffna. A friend was accompanying me, and I showed the messages only to him very quietly to alert him as well.

Initially, it was not revealed **who was responsible** for doing this. As a **Tamil person**, I was really scared, even though I didn't show it to anybody. I thought it was the LTTE.

We were expecting **riots** to soon start against the Tamils. At one point, the Police stopped the train and got in to check our bags. I was so scared and decided to be silent on the train. **My people** were calling me and telling me not to interact with anyone.

# Salah in a Church

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I have told my elder son, “Wherever you go, when the time for prayer comes, please **don't forget to pray**. Do that first.” He was part of his **school choir**, and during the Christmas season, they had to perform at Churches. So, one day, during that period, it was time to pray. He put a small paper and he began praying.

From the **corner of his eye**, he could see this Father watching him and waiting for him. He was really scared now, wondering what he was going to tell him. **Muslim praying in Church?**

The moment he finished, he says salaams and ends his prayer. The Father comes closer and said, “Son, **don't** do this here. It's a **dirty** place. You can always come into **my room**; I have a Muslim **prayer mat** that you can borrow.”

This is the beauty! My son started telling me, “You know, Dada, **I respect that**. Do you know how nice he was? So this is what I'm talking about. We must practice it to bring the people together.

# Kasu-Kusu-Fying

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This issue is **multifaceted**. You can't pinpoint one cause for it. Now I came to Castle Street Hospital and assumed duties on the first of January 1994. I started preparing for **Thai Pongal** celebrations on the 14th of January. I came on the first of January, and now on the 7th and 8th of January, we were preparing, talking to people, and getting their contributions.

Now there was a backstage whispering going on, “**Why** are we celebrating Thai Pongal?” “Should we celebrate it?” That particular time was a very tense period because that December was the **Pooneryn attack**, and the Government forces were wiped out.

The matron came and told me, “Sir, there is a lot of people who are **kasu-kusu-fying**. Why are you doing this?”

So, I had to **pacify them** and had to tell them a **Sinhalese** is doing it, then they were okay.

So, on the 13th night, we all went there and prepared a nice **Kolam**. A beautiful kolam, and then at about 10.30 pm we all went off, after arranging benches around the Kolam, so that it will not be disturbed.

Then morning at 4.30 I get a call from the cleaner saying, “Sir, we can't have the Thai Pongal celebration, because the Kolam has been **smashed up**”.

# 25 Public Holidays, and What Do We Do?

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Now, my dear friends, I want to say that we have the infrastructure to build a nice, integrated society. We have **twenty-five public holidays**, of which only two are **common** to all, that is May Day and Independence Day. All the other twenty-three are either related to **race or religion**.

Why are they declared a public holiday? Because the **entire** country respects that event. Country means the people! And if we all celebrate that event then we are all **united**.

What happens now on Thai Pongal day? The **Hindus** come and **celebrate** it, and the **other people** go for a sea bath or sleep extra, but that is not a day to spend like that. As a civilized society, we work for five days, and then we have two days' rest where we can do anything we want. But these days, it is a misnomer to say it is a 'holiday'. It is not a holiday; it is a **commemoration** day.

Thai Pongal is declared a holiday to commemorate Thai Pongal, not for us to sleep or have a sea bath. Similarly, Ramazan and Prophet Muhammad's birthday. Even if we have no Muslims working with us, using that day to **listen** to a talk on **Muslim Culture** or learn about him and then have a discussion – how good would that be for all of us!

As citizens, we must **do something**. And if we do this, we can have a nice, **integrated** society.

# Kande Uda Deshanawa

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Those days were uncertain days, you never thought that kind of thing will happen to the world. We had a very close relationship with the Christian community, but once this happened, it was a big shock. How are we going to face them? How will they believe us? The mental agony we went through. That attack was a very, very sad moment in our history. We are an emotionally betrayed people.

Here in Sri Lanka, we have a lot of culture. In some countries, they don't care about their culture. But here we are, very much **emotionally bound** by the cultures. But the only thing is we don't value others' cultures and how they respect it.

Our politicians use these emotions, and then, our people can be diverted to do things like that. So that was the **reason** it happened, I guess. We never had an issue. We had that bond. Forget about everything.

In the last 50 days, what is happening in the **Aragalaya**? You see a lot of **wonderful** things happening. People are realizing. I must thank the Christian leaders. How patient they've been. We really respect that. I still have the reply Malcolm Cardinal Ranjith sent to me a long time ago, when I wrote him a letter. That was so nice, the way he patiently handled the situation without leading people to **violence**. Even in the Bible, in '**kande uda deyschanawa**' Jesus Christ, speaks highly of **patience**.

That's the patience we see from them. It is really hard that you have practiced it. That is worth a million. You can't touch that. Even the Quran says a lot about patience, '*Ya ayyuhal lazeena aamanu istha'eenu bissabri was salah*', "*Oh you who believe, seek help with **patience and prayer***".

# Nothing to fear

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Honestly, I have a **concern** regarding Muslims, which is that we are **very close people**, you know. I don't know why that is. Sometimes, when we choose to study at a Christian school or my son decides to join the choir, some people will ask, “Why you are sending **your son** to that”? Always my answer is “They learn a lot of **cultures**”.

I come to these two points, you know, 1. there is nothing **different**, we are all the **same as humans**, and 2. we each have our **own** values.

Helen Berry said, “Good things come to those who wait, better things come to those who don't give up, and the best things come to those who believe”. I like to believe, and I see people believing here. In 2019, we were not able to see or do anything like this. I think we have something that all of **Sri Lanka needs** right now. We can just see that **change**.



# You Don't Have to Remove Your Hijab

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If you want to **judge me**, and I need to **change myself** – no, wrong call. This is my opinion. I would be proud to be a Muslim, but more than that, I'm **proud to be a Sri Lankan**. Even till today, I have clients who come to me and say “No, I don't want to order from you.”, you know, straight off.

I give quotations and then, point blank – “Because **you're so and so.**” I say, “Good enough.”

I have better clients, outside my religion, who are better than people who are in my own religion, to be honest. So don't make a change, you know, to be judged better. You **don't have to remove your hijab**. I would say educate another about it.

Not hard and fast. **Patience is the key** to anything. I've been a very patient guy. I have gone through all this. I have more employees outside my religion. Now I have more non-Muslims than Muslims in my factory.

I try not to be choosy. I don't say, “I need to go to a Muslim shop to buy this stuff”. That's some **education** I think we need to give **our own** family members, sometimes.

# A Real Achcharu

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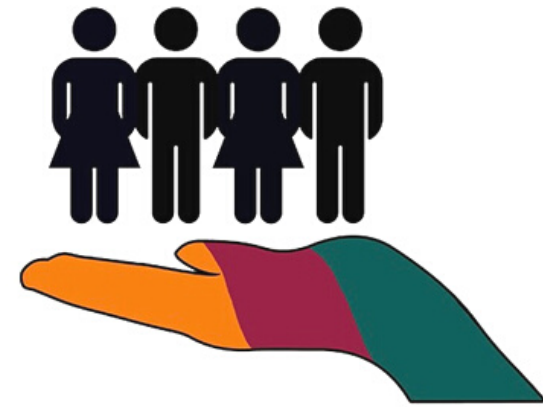
I would understand if non-Muslims had a different perspective of Islam than I did. Before 2019, if someone was **against** my religion, I would **debate them** on it. Now I sit down, and I tell them, “No, I understand, but this is what it is. They don't **represent** us. They called themselves Muslims. We did go wrong at one point, and we are trying to mend things. Certain things can never be repaired. But we hope that the future will be bright.

I want to end with an extract of this beautiful essay written by **Kieran** a sweet boy who lost his life on that tragic day. Kieran was an inspiration to start EASP. I'm going to end this with an extract that I believe could not be more apt for the occasion. This extract is from his essay titled “**My Cultural Connections**”. It was completed the evening before the attack and was submitted to the Queen's Royal Commonwealth Society essay competition.

He was awarded a gold medal as a junior runner-up. He was the youngest winner at age 11, and **the only boy** recognized at a ceremony at Buckingham Palace that **his mother** attended on his behalf.

“Racially, **my cultural connections are diverse**. I am one-quarter Sinhalese, one-quarter Tamil, three-eighth Russian, and one-eighth German. My family is Buddhist, Christian, Quaker, and Jewish. We celebrate Peraharas and Poya days, Christmas, and Hanukkah. My ancestors include great uncles knighted by the King of England, high court justices, and Russian farmers.

I am what they call in Sri Lanka a **real achcharu**, or pickle made up of many different ingredients and spices. I am connected to many cultures. **I am stronger** because I belong to them all. But, right now in Colombo, **I am #sosrilankan.**”



SL RECONCILIATION  
MOVEMENT

This is an initiative by the Easter Attack Survivors Project; a project of the SL Reconciliation Movement.