

"Nikhil is telling the truth," Madelyn shared. "I looked it up and that *is* an ancient Hindu symbol. It's been used in other religions before it became a Nazi symbol."

"Of course I'm telling the truth," Nikhil responded. "This chain means a lot to me and I'm not taking it off just because people are ignorant."

Mr. Ortiz didn't know anything about the history of the symbol, but he knew Nikhil's pendant could be disruptive to some students. Although learning more about it would be a great educational opportunity, he worried it would be impossible for the conversation to reach everyone and did not want to deal with additional disruptions. He proposed a solution to Nikhil.

"You are right about our ignorance, Nikhil," he said, "but your necklace is causing a disruption, since most people think it is symbol of hate. Perhaps you can honor your grandmother by wearing it at home."

"No," responded Nikhil, "It's not fair other students can display religious symbols and I can't. I'm not taking it off."

Mr. Ortiz sighed, "OK, but keep it under your shirt."

Once class finished and the students headed to lunch, Mr. Ortiz knew it would be only a matter of time before others learned about Nikhil's pendant. *We need to figure this out quickly*, he thought.

Questions

- 1 Nikhil believes it is unjust to allow other students to display religious symbols while he is not allowed to do the same. Do you agree? Why or why not?
- 2 It appears as though Mr. Ortiz is concerned about the lack of time he has to address the issue in class. If you were Mr. Ortiz, how would you address the situation given the time limitations?
- 3 Should Mr. Ortiz and other educators at the school educate the student body about the history of this religious symbol so that Nikhil can continue wearing the necklace? How might the religious identities of people in the school and broader community influence your response?

CASE 4.4: ISLAMOPHOBIC READ-ALLOUD

Ms. McGrath, a language arts and journalism teacher at Grove School, was determined to help students learn how to write thoughtfully about complex social issues. She raised a few eyebrows for encouraging students to write about everything from oil pipelines to gun control. However, she always was determined to keep her views on these issues to herself, so although her teaching elicited an occasional complaint, her principal was supportive and the tension always waned quickly.

Ms. McGrath also believed students interested in journalism needed to stay apprised of current events. She started every class with a question: "What's new today?"

Grove was populated predominantly by Christian and upper middle-class students. It was located near Washington, D.C. A small but growing population of Muslim students, mostly children of diplomats from upper middle-class families, recently started attending the school. Ms. McGrath knew some of the Muslim students had experienced bullying, but for the most part, from what she could see in her classes, everybody got along well.

A couple weeks into the new school year, with the anniversary of the September 11, 2001, attacks on the World Trade Center and Pentagon approaching, her students began talking about news stories commemorating the event. Sensitive to the likelihood that some students' families had been impacted directly by the attacks given the school's proximity to the Pentagon, Ms. McGrath developed a writing activity on the topic.

A few days before the anniversary, Ms. McGrath asked students to do a free write, reminding them to write whatever comes to mind. Then she gave them a prompt: "What, in your opinion, has been the impact of the events of September 11, 2001, on the United States?" She gave students five minutes to write.

After the five minutes Ms. McGrath asked for volunteers to read their free writes to the class. George, an outspoken student known for frequently referencing his Christian faith in classes, was the only student volunteering. She reluctantly looked at him and nodded, and he stood to read his free write.

"I believe most people are good," he read, "but I believe 9/11 was a tragedy brought to this country by an immoral religion, and we continue to see more terrorist attacks because of this religion. That is why we need to ban more Muslims from entering our country."

Ms. McGrath considered interrupting George at this point, but remembered that when they first shared their free writes, she set the ground rule, *we listen carefully and mindfully, without interrupting*. She felt stuck.

George continued, "But what's most important is that the attacks helped us remember how important it is that we Christians need to protect American values."

George bowed playfully and sat down. Ms. McGrath, scanning the room, saw several students nodding. Hasina, a Muslim student, stared down at her desk. Essam, another Muslim student, looked at Ms. McGrath as if to say, "Are you going to respond to that?"

Ms. McGrath knew she needed to respond, but she was not sure how.

Questions

- 1 Should Ms. McGrath have interrupted George's reading despite her own ground rule? Why or why not? If she had decided to interrupt his reading, how might she have addressed George's anti-Muslim sentiments?
- 2 Ms. McGrath had developed a reputation for being balanced on controversial issues, which is part of what allowed her to continue to engage students around those issues despite the occasional complaint. What was her responsibility in this scenario? Should she have taken a stand against George's views? Why or why not?
- 3 What are the implications of how Ms. McGrath responded when it comes to Hasina and Essam? What are the implications for the other students?