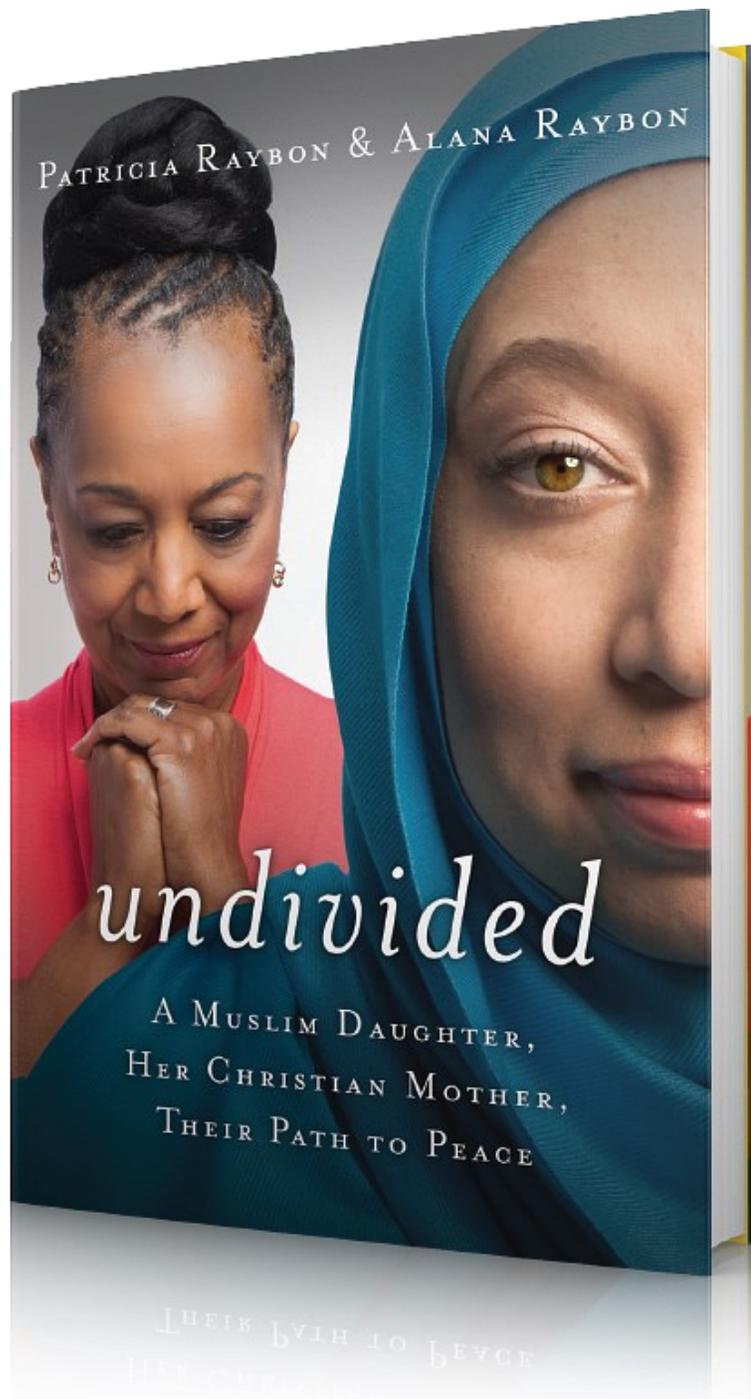


undivided

BOOK CLUB & READER'S KIT



PatriciaRaybon.Com

AlanaRaybon.Com



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Dear Reader

W

e were shopping together on a recent afternoon when we split up to check out separate areas of a women's clothing store. Each of us ended up asking for help from a different sales person. Meeting up 30 minutes later at the cash register, we looked and at our selections and broke out laughing.

We had chosen the same necklace. Same color. Same brand. Same style. And on sale! It wasn't so uncanny or profound that it felt weird. But the coincidence reminded us that, as divided as we have been in recent years, we're still very much a united mother and daughter.

That's not how we felt when we started this book, however. Torn by the struggle of holding on to our unraveling relationship—after Alana left our family's beloved Christian faith and converted to Islam—we were hurting, angry, frustrated with ourselves, and perhaps also with God, and not sure how to move forward.

Agreeing to write our way to understanding and healing seemed fraught with problems. What would we say? How would we talk? How would we negotiate our process? What if we raised the tensions between us instead of resolved them? As you'll see, questions dogged our progress and tensions challenged us every way. But, for us, the journey was worth it.

We both hope you'll agree. Even more, if you're facing a family divide, we hope our story inspires you to try to bridge it. And like a new necklace, may each chain in your circle stay bright, strong and connected.

Patricia and Alana

Q & A With Patricia and Alana

PATRICIA RAYBON:

1. When Alana was growing up, how was your faith embraced and expressed as a family?

Faith is my rock, my anchor. Our headquarters for that was our family's church, where Alana was baptized. Like many moms, however, I confused being in church with being in Christ. For Alana and her sister, that meant taking them to church every Sunday, to youth activities, choir, VBS, the whole nine yards. I introduced them to organized activities under the roof of a church, but apparently not to Jesus as the Christ. In the rush to get to church on time, I forgot to make the main thing the main thing. Her sister stayed in the faith, but Alana left. It was heartbreaking.

2. How did you first take the news that Alana wanted to become a Muslim?

A daughter can call from college with all sorts of news—forgetting her mother is still dealing with her own life. In my case, my husband and I were struggling to repair a breakdown in our marriage, my widowed mother had come to live with us, and my other daughter was closing a business to start a new chapter in her life. Then my husband had a cardiovascular emergency and almost died.

In all of that, Alana called to say, "Mom, I'm a Muslim." I had no emotional room to respond. I just thanked her for calling, asked how her classes were going and if her car was running OK. Then after a few minutes of such talk, we hung up. Looking back, it was my oddest reaction ever to a phone call.

3. Why did it hurt you so badly that Alana chose to change faiths?

I felt like a failure. Like I'd failed my faith, family, father and mother, my longtime church and my lifetime God. That covers everybody and everything! In all areas of life that matter to me, I had failed by not passing on to my daughter a saving knowledge of who Jesus is.

I mean, I had prayed to the Lord to get pregnant with Alana, and the Lord answered. My African-American family across generations had trusted the Lord to move mountains. Now here was Alana rejecting our faith and our God. It hurt from every angle and in every way. Then the hurt turned to grief. The division between us was deep. A chasm.

4. What was the impetus for you to decide to "bridge the divide" and talk about Alana's conversion in a book, and why via a book?

Mothers can't be angry with daughters. That math doesn't add up. Nothing in that lines up with God. Also I'm a writer—writing is how I think, discover, analyze, learn. It's also my way of prayer. To be honest, writing is also safe for me. I'm a journalist by training and I've written published books. Alana is a beautiful writer in her own right. For these and other reasons, a book was the only way I could imagine us tackling our division. Gratefully, Alana agreed and joined me on the journey.

5. Has your view of Muslims changed because of your deeper conversations with Alana?

Dramatically. Because of stories of terrorism in the news, I was preoccupied with Islam seeming to birth evil. This distracted me even though, over the years, Alana has introduced me to scores of American Muslims whose families, like mine, are just trying to live good lives, be good citizens, raise their children, pay their taxes, pay off their mortgages, keep a roof over their heads and serve God as they know him. Bridging the divide with Alana helped me to get in touch with the humanity of the more than 1 billion Muslims in the world. Terrorism, as it turns out, is an anomaly. Even when it's not, Muslim people—as all people—need our prayers. That's how I seek to see all people now. Our journey to heal inspired this outlook.

6. What was the hardest part of this process for you? And, how is your relationship with Alana today?

The hardest part was recognizing that I'm not always right—especially in knowing the ways of God. What if God was asking me to let go? To trust him? To accept Alana's right to choose her own faith and leave the outcome to him? Backing down was tough. I love Alana and care deeply about her salvation. Finally I realized I can stop fighting with Alana, but, in the meantime, I can keep praying. In that way, we can be family again.

ALANA RAYBON:

1. Alana, why did you decide to leave the faith you were raised in and become a Muslim?

Growing up, I always felt a connection to God. The church was a loving, warm place for me. As a child, I believed in God, but I never connected with the idea of the Trinity. When I found Islam, I finally felt spiritually fulfilled. I didn't intend to offend my mother with my faith choice, but I had to follow my heart.

2. How hard is it to practice Islam when Islamophobia is a real issue today?

Practicing Islam in America is wonderful because I feel free to express my religious identity. I'm surrounded by friends and coworkers who accept me for who I am. It's not until I turn on the news that I become concerned about what people think of me. I worry that because of my clothing and scarves, people might equate me with extremism.

The beautiful moments I have with people in my community, in my classroom, or in my mosque, however, melt away these fears.

3. Are you frustrated about the ways in which Islam is portrayed in the media?

I'm disappointed that much of the coverage on Islam in the news is negative and doesn't represent the faith that I know and love. There were many times during the writing of this book that I wanted my mom to turn off the news and hear about my experiences with Islam directly. I wish that Muslim advocates for peace had more opportunities to speak out against terrorism on news networks, and more positive stories about Muslims made it into main stream stories.

4. What was the impetus for you to comply with your mother and write the book?

I remember being on the phone when my mother asked me if I wanted to write this book with her. Her voice shook as she spoke, hesitating to ask me to do the daunting task of writing through our conflict. I was scared at first for many reasons. I worried about what my mother would say when she

heard my story, and how she would react as we talked. I finally decided that we had to take a chance. I told myself that our relationship was worth the effort, no matter how hard it seemed at first. It was time for a change, and I was ready to begin the climb toward a solution.

5. What was the hardest part of this process for you? And, how is your relationship with your mother today?

I hit a low moment when I realized that my mother was hurting so deeply. I felt extreme guilt and personal responsibility for her dismay. Another difficult moment in our journey was the frustration I felt when she refused to accept my right to choose a faith. She has since come to respect my freedom to choose my religion, which was extremely liberating for me.

PATRICIA & ALANA RAYBON:

1. How do you celebrate holidays together? And, what advice would you give other interfaith families on how they can thrive through their differences?

(Patricia) Holidays can be a trap. So we don't celebrate religious holidays together. Not yet anyway. Instead, my husband and I now redeem Christmas, for example, by taking gifts to seniors and celebrating with Christian friends who are like family. Last year, we invited over our longtime next-door neighbors who, like us, are empty nesters. It was enjoyable and fun, rather than moping around missing Alana and her family.

Meantime, Alana and I look for other times to "be a family." That's most days of the year. It's a different approach to living out the yearly calendar, and it's not textbook perfect, but it's good. As A. W. Tozer said, when we're pleased with life, God is pleased. That can be true every day of the year.

(Alana) My mother and I have come so far, but we hit a road block during holidays. It's a deeply personal subject for the both of us. We send each other cards on Mother's Day, try to meet up on Thanksgiving, and phone on other non-religious holidays. I spend Ramadan and Eids with my family and friends in the community. On Christmas and Easter I think of my mother often, remembering how much she has missed us on the holidays.

An important piece of advice I can offer to interfaith families is to agree to talk, and then learn how to listen with empathy. Healing takes time, and your faith can help you remain strong during the hardest times.

2. What is your hope for readers of your book?

Our hope is that people will see themselves in our story and learn to live together on this Earth. Faith should be a facilitator to healing, not an impediment. We hope people will begin to stop pointing fingers and start asking questions, stop fighting and start listening. Listening to each other and also to God. He's the bridge across troubled waters. So start and end with him. We hope our story shows how a family can make that happen. Moving from our families, then we can love and bless the world.

Discussion Questions

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hat drew you to Patricia and Alana's story? Are you divided from anyone in particular in your family? Is religion or lifestyle choice the cause? How does being divided feel?

2. What do you think makes mother-daughter relationships especially prone to conflict?
3. After a ten-year standoff, Patricia invited Alana to address the faith division in their relationship. In your life, what holds you back from attempting to resolve a divided relationship?
4. The Raybons' first question to each other was: Can we talk? But what if a family member has no tolerance for others, or displays prejudicial or discriminatory feelings about people of different backgrounds, lifestyles or faiths? How should you talk to that family member?
5. What are the things that either encourage you to talk or inhibit you from conversing about faith, or with someone of a different faith?
6. How do you know when someone in your family is actually listening to you? How does it feel?
7. Patricia was surprised at Alana's complaint that she "never asked" about her opinions or feelings. What makes asking so profound?

8. What does family mean to you? What role does faith play in your description of “family”?

9. In a family divide, what does it mean to you to “let go”?

10. In *Undivided*, who had to “let go” the most and what do you think of that strategy?

11. Alana was surprised by how hurt her mother felt. Why are we often unaware of how our actions are impacting others?

12. How did Patricia’s and Alana’s respective faiths impact their decisions about how to relate to one another? How does your faith impact your relationships?

13. What does the *hijab* as a garment mean to you? Why was it such a point of contention between Patricia and Alana?

14. What is peace? How do you define it? What did Alana and Patricia learn about it—and what did you learn?

15. Patricia and Alana continue their journey to peace. What means have you tried to establish peace and bridge a divide in your family? Or with other people you know?

PATRICIA'S ADVICE

To Parents of Grown Children Who Choose a Different Faith

- **Go to God. Take your hurt, shock, anger or whatever you're feeling to God. Tell God all about it.**
- **If you failed to pass your faith to your adult child, concentrate now on trusting God more than beating yourself up about it. Forgiveness is key.**
- **Allow yourself to grieve. But don't get stuck in hurt and guilt. Take the long view, understanding you're on a journey with God.**
- **Ask your grown child about his or her faith choice. Why? Tell me more about it. Listen without judgment or arguing. Ask God for strength to ask and listen.**
- **Seek God for wisdom and insight. Ask: What are you teaching me in this? About you? About me? About my adult child? About how you want to use my situation?**
- **Focus on what you can control. Look for places and people to serve by your faith, worrying less now about your grown child's faith decision.**
- **Avoid arguing. Talk about things other than religion. Do life things together—share a meal, see a play, paint the house, help the poor, take a walk, go on vacation. Love your grown child actively. Don't break or cut off your relationship.**
- **Honor your child's faith restrictions, if any (food or dress codes, for example).**
- **Find new ways to celebrate holidays you no longer share. In the meantime, on "ordinary" days during the rest of the calendar, look for ways to connect with your child—looking for the positives in your child's character and life.**
- **Stay prayerful. Trust God to handle the future. Meantime, look for the good in life. Be your best self.**

ALANA'S ADVICE

To Grown Children

Who Choose a Different Faith

- **Initiate the discussion.** Ask your parents if they are willing to talk about your conflict, then commit to having a civil conversation.
- **Keep in mind that faith traditions should be the means to resolve family conflicts, not an impediment to peace.** Use your faith to help you see solutions.
- **Try to remember that God wants you to have a positive relationship with your parents.** Remain hopeful that your relationship will eventually heal.
- **Be patient and empathetic.** Try to understand the hurt that your parents may be experiencing and show compassion for their feelings.
- **Listen.** Let your parents express their perspectives. Validate their feelings and reassure them that you care about their opinions.
- **Look inward.** Remember that healing is a two-way street. Try to find ways in which you can be a better family member.
- **Don't take it personally.** It's natural for a parent to want to have influence in their children's way of life. Assert your individuality respectfully.
- **Forgive.** Don't hold on to the past. Letting go of old hurt will free you from resentment.
- **Lead by example.** Show your parents how your belief has transformed your life by sharing the great things you are doing every day.
- **Ask God to guide you through this tough time.** Prayer can help you remain strong even in the most difficult times.

Thank you for reading *Undivided*. May our story inspire you to bridge any divides with your family and the world!

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