

When I got a “Dear NULL” e-mail

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I got my first ever “Dear NULL” e-mail from DSCC (Democratic Senatorial Campaign Committee) and I was devastated. My first reaction was “I have not contributed much and that is why”. Then there was another. It was about Al Franken. The things it said were genuine but still, being called “Null”! I thought that either some Republican mole had gotten into the Democrats’ fold or there was someone who did not want to write “Dear Muhammad”. The third possibility that came to mind was that it must be some Hindu American, as I had been badmouthing India to spite the fellows who were badmouthing Pakistan. (I ran away from Pakistan, but I still do not like someone chanting, “Give Peace a Chance, Destroy Pakistan” with no regard for the consequences.)

Let me put it this way, I was so annoyed that when it came to writing on what Obama Inauguration meant for me. I wrote the following, and I am sure it killed all the chances getting me invited to the inauguration:

“This inauguration would have meant a lot to me, but recently I received an e-mail addressed to me that came from DSCC and that addressed me as: Dear NULL. The e-mail was From: "J.B. Poersch" <info@dsc.org>. The subject was Al-Franken. This was the second e-mail from DSCC, addressing me thus.

Being addressed as NULL got me thinking perhaps this fellow did not want to write "Dear MUHAMMAD". That brought in front of my eyes all the troubles that I have gone through because of an obviously Muslim name, since I came to the US.

So, now, I do not know what this inauguration should mean to me. On the one hand I am happy that the man who promised change would be our president and on the other there is the question: "How long will I be hated, pushed aside, or ridiculed for being Muhammad, in my own country?" Whatever becomes of me I am happy at the dawn of a new era in the US. I hope and pray that the inauguration goes well and my country prospers under the leadership of President Obama.”

I know I need to explain a lot about what I wrote to the Inauguration Committee, but let me finish the story. The very next day I got a “Dear NULL” e-mail from Senator Harry Reid. The dear Senator was yapping "Yesterday was a terrific day to be a Democrat. We swore in 7 new senators, a true testament to all the hard work you put in to ensure a Democratic victory last November." ... The e-mail was otherwise authentic with the difference that the address was info@dsc.org.

Now none of the meanings of NULL that I know of seem to be encouraging or at least in consonance with what followed in Mr. Reid’s or any other of those e-mails. But still, being called NULL, in place of Muhammad was plainly not acceptable. I kept bubbling with rage. Those of you, who have felt enraged at something, might agree with me that an angry man without an outlet is just like a dog that has been caged, or tied for a long time. Perhaps that is why Prophet Muhammad had said things like: Anger is the

key to all evil. (Tell that to the “Islamic terrorists”! But there are a lot of things that the Prophet said and the terrorists with Muslim names ignore.)

Luckily I saw an outlet that, eventually, saved me from getting too angry. The very “promising outlet” was a news story about the Military sending “Dear John Doe” letters to the families of fallen soldiers. I started writing “This bug seems to be going around at other places too...” and wrote part of what I have written above, leaving out the letter to the Inauguration Committee, of course. What saved the day for me was an old habit that I acquired after some foot in the mouth scenarios; I would rather not talk about. Whenever I post something on the internet, I try to check if I had goofed somewhere. So I searched for “Dear NULL” and there it was! The proof that my anger was not quite justified.

There is indeed plenty of mention of “Dear NULL” letters on the internet. In fact there are also mentioned some examples of “Dear NULL , NULL” letters. Someone also, angrily, mentioned the Al Franken letter that I have mentioned. Some folks in the programming field have tried, rather valiantly, to explain the reasons. A “reason” given by an “e-mail provider” of sorts was “It is due to software glitch”, seems easy enough to repeat. The fact is when you have to send a lot of e-mails you use some professional agencies. The agencies put the list of names and addresses in their database and a computer program sends the e-mails. The enclosed message is obviously fixed, but the names are a different matter. If the program finds something wrong with the name, i.e., if it is geared for a First name, Middle name, Last name string and there comes a fellow, like myself, with only two names the program sends an empty string, which means “PRINT NULL”.

When I had had my fill with the internet and when I realized that I had already made a big enough fool of myself, I asked my children; swallowing the little pride I had left. “The SQL server (Structured query language server) got only your e-mail and not your name” was the response from my number two. Number one wrote “You can get a “Dear NULL” email from an auto-email program. Click on the following link and search for “Dear =” in the text. You will find that by default it is set equal to “null” (upper case likely due to capitalize procedure). If in a database that sent you an email automatically (SPAM anyone?) only your email was present but not your name you will get a “Dear NULL” email.

No conspiracy here ;)

<http://forums.frontrange.com/viewtopic.php?t=50852&sid=fc48689045067842d3d8f56e01914c5f>

Am I ashamed of being angry? Not at all, in fact I dare you to feel friendly to the folks who have sent you a “Dear NULL” letter and asked you to join them. I can feel slightly ashamed at not knowing the reason, but that is all I am willing to concede. Now let me give you my reasons for being a bit sensitive about my name. Apart from being my first name, Muhammad has a religious significance for me. Seeing my troubles one of my co-workers once, in my early days in the US, suggested that I change my first name to something more in the local color. He did give me examples of some foreigners who had wisely adopted Christian sounding names and had prospered, in spite of their very hard accents.

While I regard true Christians and Jews as early Muslims and a suitable Christian or a Jewish name would not bother me at all, I happen to love my first name. It reminds me of the Prophet. Besides, changing a

name to try to placate students in lower classes seemed like capitulation on the one hand and cheating on the other. Also, I was doing research and getting cited, there seemed to be no trouble that could be insurmountable. But the constant irritation due to my name and face took its toll. I was diagnosed with imminent kidney failure. The word got out and I was booted out of my job with the comment that the school did not see me as part of their future. That started my vagabond days, until I went into acute kidney failure a couple of years later.

Luckily I was in Maryland at that time. I was given good care; no one seemed to be bothered by my name being Muhammad or my accent being British-like. Within a year I was alive again with a transplanted kidney and within a couple of months I was teaching, again. God bless the soul of the poor young person who died in Arizona and gave me a second chance at life, must be young because it has been thirteen years since the transplant and I am still peeing. The transplant gave me at least eight years of teaching and research. Of course I could not get a tenure track job, but who cares?

I have skipped the reasons of my whining that I have been pushed about, for my name. Instead, let me tell you a story from my distant past. After six years of school, I started work at a local workshop, in my village in Pakistan. The job was to assemble padlocks according to their key design, something really anyone could do. I started as an apprentice to a guy called Chimna Mirasi. His name was Chaman Ali and his caste was Mirasi. Chimna was a sort of corruption of his name. The English equivalent of Mirasi could be "The keeper of the genealogical records", note that I have not used the word "genealogist" for it would be too posh an equivalent. The Mirasis were supposed to know the family trees of their clients and were once a very respectable caste. But when the times changed people started keeping their own written records the Mirasis fell on hard times.

What was worse Chimna was a refugee from Jammun, consider it a part of Kashmir, so all his father's clientele was either back in Jammun or dispersed in Pakistan. That meant Chimna would have to work out of his caste, in a workshop. Now this fellow Chimna was very excitable. He was not the fighting type, but quarrelsome he definitely was. Most of his fuss was about his rights and more than fuss it was, or at least it appeared to be, whining. On the other hand I was the silent guy. I would not raise a fuss if half of my work was rejected for being imperfect and I was ready to take on harder yet less paying jobs such as electroplating or cutting metal sheets with hammer and chisel.

One day, and it was a pay-day, Chimna was very excited and complaining about not being paid enough. He actually made the accountant go over the whole of the previous month's record, just to make sure that he was not being had. Someone compared me to him saying something like "The upbringing shows". That silly remark often haunts me, especially when I get to whine and take offence at, tiny misunderstandings, small insults and little inconveniences such as my name not being spelled right or my paper not being mentioned as a source, or someone telling me that my references had not supported my application.

Being put in a similar position has made me realize the predicament that Chimna was in. I think that if Chimna could see some light at the end of the tunnel he would not fuss and whine as much. To each unfavorable comparison he would say "Time will tell" as I used to say, once. As my family's financial

situation improved, I went to school. During High School I worked part time. Chimna was the same old Chimna, always singing and working and never letting pass a chance to raise a fuss. Then I heard that Chimna got married and left the village in search of better opportunities. I had in the mean time joined a college away from home and, almost, lost touch. A couple of years later, I was home for summer when I saw Chimna. He was weak and he was selling mangoes. I asked how he was. He sounded tired. I asked him to weigh me some mangoes. While he was doing that I noticed there was something wrong with the balance; instead of checking what I said he started arguing. Same old Chimna, I thought to myself.

Sometime later I heard Chimna died, he had TB. I became curious and asked around. It seems that in an effort to earn more he had over exerted himself and had succumbed to TB. I have often wondered, was it really TB that killed him? Was it really being from a lower caste that his behavior was as it was? To me the answer seems to be that Chimna died the same day his mother died and his father was badly wounded, at the hands of Hindu rioters (or Indian army) in Jammun and he had to almost drag his father and his younger sister to safety. He himself was a young boy then. They lived off charity when he was young, his father being unable to work. But when he was able to earn he told his father not to accept charity and he worked until the day he died to keep his family off charity. I think whatever his caste, he had a noble spirit. He behaved as he did because he did not see any light at the end of the tunnel, he was poor, uneducated and had no hope of anyone respecting him.

It is hard to see how I compare with him. I lived a privileged life, even in poverty, got good education, in Pakistan and abroad. The only hardships that I can call hardships came after I found out that it was not safe to go back to the country where I grew up and that being a Muslim in the West was not something pleasant. Still wherever I went after that the host societies, and later my adopted country, let me live and took good care of me when I fell ill.

Then why do I whine and why am I so touchy? It would be hard for you to understand, unless you see your degrees from decent enough universities disregarded as not good enough. It would be hard for you to understand unless a big gun in your field writes an account of the past X years, and you are mentioned in passing while folks who se work was based on yours, and your co-authors', get plenty of citations. It would be hard for you to understand unless you see all possible variations of your name and insisting on the right one get you in hot water. It would be hard for you to understand unless you see your chairman joining hands with some class black sheep to create trouble. Let me say it again, it would be hard for you to understand unless you cannot live away from your home, to take a job in another city, and the school in your town suddenly decides to hire younger folks.

I can go on but I think you got my drift. My experience is the only reason, I sometimes forgive myself for being, occasionally, myopic and self centered, as in the case of the "Dear NULL" e-mails. Let me end with the latest development. The DSCC has modified its "Dear NULL" letter to "Dear Friend". I would not claim that it was the result of my letter to the "Inauguration Committee".