And put It under your turban.

December 26, 2007 By David Weiss

His name was Gurwinder Singh.

I was riding in a taxi heading downtown on Ninth Avenue this afternoon when I noticed that the driver was wearing a baseball cap, yet bore a full beard in the style of the Sikh religion. He was not wearing a turban, as more orthodox Sikhs wear.

The Sikhs are often the butt of bad jokes on late night talk shows. Most of the American public has absolutely no idea who or what they are. An astonishing number of people mistake them for some kind of Arabic sect, when in fact they are not Arabic at all.

I asked Gurwinder whether he was a Sikh, and whether all Sikhs use Singh as their last name, as many of us suppose, or whether most people named Singh were Sikhs. In reply, he told me the story of the origins of the Sikhs and some of their fundamental beliefs

The founder of the Sikh religion was “Guru Nanak”, who was born in 1469. He preached a message of love and understanding and criticized the blind rituals of the Hindus and Muslims. Guru Nanak passed on his enlightened leadership of this new religion to nine successive Gurus. The final living Guru, Guru Gobind Singh died in 1708. The Sikhs live according to the following principles:

- There is only One God. He is the same God for all people of all religions.

- The soul goes through cycles of births and deaths before it reaches the human form. The goal of our life is to lead an exemplary existence so that one may merge with God. Sikhs should remember God at all times and practice living a virtuous and truthful life while maintaining a balance between their spiritual obligations and temporal obligations.

- The true path to achieving salvation and merging with God does not require renunciation of the world or celibacy, but living the life of a householder, earning a honest living and avoiding worldly temptations and sins.

- Sikhism condemns blind rituals such as fasting, visiting places of pilgrimage, superstitions, worship of the dead, idol worship etc.

Sikhism preaches that people of different races, religions, or sex are all equal in the eyes of God. It teaches the full equality of men and women. Women can participate in any religious function or perform any Sikh ceremony or lead the congregation in prayer.

The name Singh is Hindu for “Lion”, and while not everyone named Singh is a Sikh (the golfer Vijay Singh, for example,) almost every Sikh male uses the name Singh.

It’s not what you thought, is it? In fact, most of it sounds pretty reasonable to me. Nonetheless, don’t expect to see me in a black turban anytime soon, even though “David Singh” does have kind of a nice ring to it.

The most important lesson that my encounter with Gurwinder today should teach us all is that we should never prejudge people. When we make assumptions like that we not only cheat ourselves of the truth - it devalues the humanity of others. It is the same kind of thinking that perpetuates the stigma associated with HIV and AIDS, and if those of us living with HIV and AIDS engage in the same kind of judgmental thinking, we can hardly expect the rest of the world to refrain from prejudging us. If anything, we should be teaching the world how extraordinarily courageous many of us are. My good friend Susan is a perfect example:

Susan has been living with HIV since 1983. Last May, her CD4 count was 87, and she came down with shingles. In November, her CD4 count was 8, and she came down with PCP. In addition to the PCP. Susan’s shingles spread to the retina of her left eye, which became partially detached.

This is a simulation of what Susan now sees:

This isn’t merely a visual effect. Susan’s shingles also cause swelling, pain, extreme sensitivity to light, more pain, a gravel in the eye feeling, and an eye that’s almost constantly watering.
She takes Truvada, AZT, Reyataz and Norvir, and on top of that, Bactrim and a mega dose of Valtrex.

Despite it all, despite the pain, the pills, and the partial blindness, Susan has raised two teenage girls on her own, and she goes to work at job almost every day to support her family.

Her story is hardly unique. The forums here are filled with the stories of incredibly courageous men and women like Susan. If someone wrote a book it would tear your heart out to read it.

I posted this entry today to remind us all that we are still in the midst of this struggle. As we go into the new year, let us never forget that the epidemic is still not even close to being under control, and that we can never allow ourselves to become complacent.

I’m sure Mr. Singh would agree with me.

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