

ACADEMY AWARD® NOMINEE
BEST DOCUMENTARY SHORT FILM



FROM NOBEL PEACE PRIZE LAUREATE

MALALA

STRANGER AT THE GATE

A FILM BY
JOSHUA SEFTTEL

SCREENING GUIDE



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Reviewed by: MPAC Hollywood Bureau Based in Los Angeles, the MPAC® Hollywood Bureau changes the narrative of Islam and Muslims in the entertainment industry so that audiences see Muslims as vital contributors to creating social and cultural change in America and around the world.



ABOUT THE FILM

After 25 years of service, U.S. Marine Richard “Mac” McKinney returns home to Indiana filled with an all-consuming rage toward the people he had been fighting against. Still fueled by his desire to fight for his country, he plans to bomb the local mosque.

But when he comes face to face with the community of Afghan refugees and others of Muslim faith whom he seeks to kill, his plan takes an unexpected turn.

FROM THE FILMMAKER

“As a boy growing up in upstate New York, I faced antisemitism. After 9/11 I began to notice the level of Islamophobia in the U.S. and thought, maybe I can do something to give a more accurate depiction of American Muslims.”

As a documentary filmmaker, I seek stories that expose viewers to different perspectives and inspire them to question their ingrained beliefs.

*My latest film, **Stranger at the Gate**, started as a simple mission to share a transformative story and then went on to receive an Oscar nomination. This led to an influx of organizations and corporations requesting access to this film to use it as a tool for building compassion and understanding the importance of diverse thought within a community.*

Suddenly, we found ourselves in a position where we could grow the film’s reach while deeply empowering viewers in the process.

We are honored to partner with corporations that share a similar mission of challenging conceptions in order to build resiliency.

We believe that by expanding our worldview, we not only become more empathetic humans, but also critical thinkers who can apply a multitude of perspectives to everyday problem-solving.”

JOSHUA SEFTEL
DIRECTOR

A STRANGER PLANNED TO BOMB MY MOSQUE. HE BECAME A MEMBER INSTEAD.

*Bibi Bahrami is a co-founder of the Islamic Center of Muncie, Indiana, and the subject of the Oscar-nominated documentary **Stranger at the Gate**, executive produced by Malala Yousafzai. The following is an excerpt of an Opinion piece for the **Washington Post** about the film.*

Several years ago, an unfamiliar man showed up at my little mosque, a squat brick building on the side of a four-lane highway in Muncie, Indiana. He had a large U.S. Marine Corps logo and a sketch of a small skull with a lightning bolt tattooed on his right arm. His face was flush, he barely made eye contact, and his fists were clenched. He seemed angry.

Naturally, we saw potential danger. In these days of intense cultural division, hatred against Muslims is palpable, and our places of worship have been the targets of terrible crimes. But we also sensed vulnerability in this stranger. My husband, an Afghan refugee and a gentle physician, welcomed the man with a heartfelt hug. Later, I sat alone with him in our mosque library—to share a smile and ask his name, to offer comfort and show him respect.

Why, you might ask, would I put myself in this position? When I was a young girl growing up in Afghanistan, I met troubled men like this at the homeless shelter run by my father. And when I fled the war in Afghanistan to a refugee camp in Pakistan as a teenager, I cared for many needy people. I have always believed in the idea that we must welcome the stranger, the person in need. And that if we search for common ground with all those we meet, we will discover our shared humanity, and we will all be better for it.

(See Supplemental Resources for full text)



"People often ask why I, an activist for education and women's rights, want to produce films and TV shows. It's because I believe in the power of entertainment to connect people—whether that's across the living room or across the world.

I have experienced the damage unchecked division can cause. At 15 years old, I was shot in the head for speaking against the Pakistani Taliban's ban on girls' education. The assailant wasn't a white soldier like Mac. He was a young man, not much older than me, a Muslim from my own community. He, like so many others, had been led to believe that his narrow view of the world was the right one. That his Islam was better than mine. That the role of women and girls he accepted was the one we should all be forced to practice.

*Stories have the power to reveal our shared humanity and connect people across cultures, religions, and countries. They can also teach us about ourselves, something I experienced the first time I saw **Stranger at the Gate**, a short documentary nominated for an Academy Award this year.*

*I hope that you'll watch **Stranger at the Gate** and begin to understand Mac and Bibi's life-saving message: To believe that people can change—and to be willing to change ourselves—is our best hope for a better world."*

MALALA YOUSAFZAI
NOBEL PEACE PRIZE LAUREATE
EXECUTIVE PRODUCER

(Source: [Hollywood Reporter](#); see Supplemental Resources for full text)



KEY PEOPLE FEATURED IN THE FILM

BIBI BAHRAMI, COMMUNITY ADVOCATE

Bibi Bahrami was born and raised in Behsood, Afghanistan. She came to Muncie, Indiana in 1986 as a refugee during the Soviet war in Afghanistan to join her husband, Saber Bahrami, a doctor. Bibi Bahrami has been a community activist for over thirty years. After learning English and earning her GED, she went on to earn an art degree from Ball State University. In 2002, she founded and became president of her own nonprofit organization, AWAKEN (Afghan Women's and Kids' Education & Necessities), in order to give back to the Afghan women and children she left behind. Through Bahrami's leadership and the support of her community, AWAKEN has made a difference in education, healthcare services, and vocational opportunities for thousands of Afghan women and families for over a decade. In 2021, after learning that the need for housing and resettlement for incoming refugees was great, Bahrami created MARRC as a sub-committee of AWAKEN to help Afghan refugees resettle and thrive in Muncie and the surrounding Delaware county. MARRC has provided 115 people and 35 families with six months of urgent support, such as rent, utilities, jobs, and many other resources. Bahrami is also a member of the Muncie Rotary Club, Interfaith Fellowship and is president of the Islamic Center of Muncie. She is the recipient of the Vivian Conley Award for Humanitarian Service, the Indiana Women of Achievement Award, Ball State's International Development Award, and the Rotary VIVA Award for Volunteerism.

RICHARD "MAC" MCKINNEY, U.S. MARINE CORPS AND ARMY VETERAN

After 25 years in the armed services, and several tours in the Middle East, Marine Richard "Mac" McKinney came back to the United States filled with rage toward Muslims. In what he viewed as a final mission for his country, McKinney built an IED and planned to blow up the Islamic Center of Muncie. Then a fateful trip to the mosque, where he was welcomed by the local Muslim community, changed the course of his life; he eventually became the president and leader of the mosque. He started his own business called From Hate to Understanding, and through it he travels and speaks about his journey and changing the narrative. He has become an honorary board member for We Are Many-United Against Hate. A man of deep conviction and unwavering perseverance, McKinney has left an indelible mark on the world through his transformative experiences. He has a plan to change hate to understanding one smile, one conversation at a time.

KEY FILMMAKERS



JOSHUA SEFTEL, DIRECTOR AND PRODUCER

Joshua Seftel is known for directing the Emmy-winning landmark series *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy*, the feature film *War, Inc.* starring John Cusack, Marisa Tomei, and Ben Kingsley, and his regular appearances on *CBS Sunday Morning*, where he interviews his 86-year-old mother. *Stranger at the Gate* is the latest film in Seftel's Emmy- and Peabody-nominated Secret Life of Muslims project (SXSW), which combats Islamophobia with filmmaking. Seftel, who experienced antisemitism as a child, has been committed to working on this subject matter for the past several years. His other award-winning films include *Taking on the Kennedys* (POV), *Ennis' Gift* (HBO), *The Home Team* (SXSW), and *The Many Sad Fates of Mr. Toledano* (New York Times Op-Docs, Tribeca). He is also a contributor to the Peabody Award-winning podcast *This American Life* and *The New York Times*.



MALALA YOUSAFZAI, EXECUTIVE PRODUCER

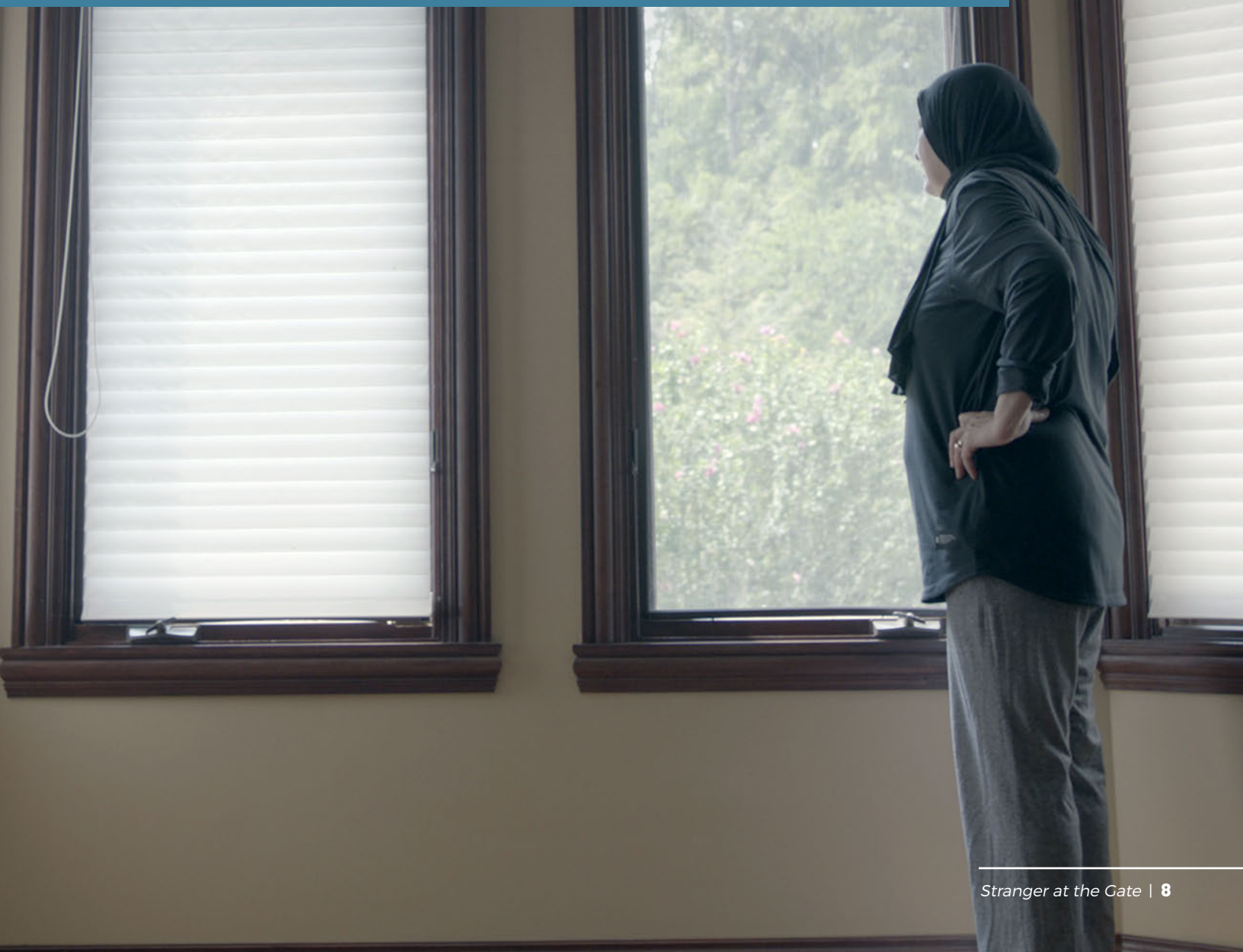
Malala Yousafzai began her activism at age 11, when she anonymously blogged about life under the Taliban in Pakistan's Swat Valley, particularly the ban on girls' education. She soon began advocating publicly, and at age 15 she was shot in the head by the Taliban for speaking out. After many months of surgery and rehabilitation in the United Kingdom, she founded the Malala Fund with her father, Ziauddin. A year later, Malala received the Nobel Peace Prize in recognition of her work for education and equality.

"Joshua Seftel's film can be an incredibly valuable tool. It is all about taking the time to get to know other people and to learn to appreciate their differences and similarities. It is all about letting go of one's preconceived notions and opening your heart and finding that we are not so different after all. The film can be used in a team-building capacity to open up employee's minds. It is particularly powerful in that it portrays someone who started off as very closed-minded who ends up transforming his life and understanding others."

MICHAEL WERTHEIM, COO OF FATHERLY

*"I shared the movie with Window Seat (in-house agency) during a team offsite. We pride ourselves on welcoming voices from all walks of life, and this film was a poignant reminder of the power of listening, learning, and loving outside our comfort zones. Understanding how pre-existing narratives give rise to bias and impede our ability to tell authentic stories, we used the film to challenge our beliefs. We also examined how those beliefs showed up in our work. **Stranger at the Gate** catalyzed deeper conversations that may not have happened otherwise."*

MAYA DUKES, EXECUTIVE CREATIVE DIRECTOR, DELTA AIR LINES



USING THIS GUIDE



TIPS FOR FACILITATION

This discussion guide is meant to spur thoughtful conversations about the short film **Stranger at the Gate**. Rather than watching the film at a distance, we encourage you to connect with Richard “Mac” McKinney’s struggle and Bibi Bahrami’s tenderness. How can we learn from the life-altering change that a simple act of kindness elicited?

This guide offers multiple pathways for engaging with the film. For general audiences and community groups, there are clear avenues to discuss the film, personal connection to its themes, and steps to take for a more connected and caring community.

For workplaces, this guide outlines a path to deeper engagement with diversity, equity, inclusion, and belonging goals. By using the film as an emotionally gripping anchor, you can convene conversations about implicit bias, othering, and how to counter the isolating and polarizing tides of our current culture within your company or organization. The guide is divided into pre- and post-screening activities, and the post-screening section is divided into themes. The sections are meant to be flexible, each with general discussion questions and experiential exercises to dive deeper into a theme. Choose the pace, depth, and subject matter that work for your context and goals.

BEFORE FACILITATION

Make sure to preview **Stranger at the Gate** and read through the entire discussion guide before facilitating your discussion. It's helpful to process your own ideas and reactions beforehand so you can better engage participants in discussion of the film's themes.

Decide which themes will be most impactful for your group and which questions to highlight within those themes. Discussions of bias, stereotyping, and cultural divisions can be tough, so ease into the deeper questions slowly.



DIVERSITY, EQUITY, AND INCLUSION GOALS

Frame this discussion as an opportunity to improve the culture of the institution by actively committing to diversity, equity, and inclusion. Multiple studies suggest that companies that authentically engage with long-term diversity, equity, and inclusion programs are more adaptable and innovative and have higher rates of employee satisfaction and retention.

(Source: [Forbes](#))

Diverse viewpoints, backgrounds, and work styles are a net strength in all types of groups.

TIPS FOR COURAGEOUS, CURIOUS, AND CIVIL CONVERSATIONS

The facilitator's job is to create a welcoming, warm, and inclusive environment in which to discuss the sometimes painful topics of prejudice, shared trauma, and othering that **Stranger at the Gate** surfaces. Participants need to feel comfortable sharing their personal experiences. Model an open and vulnerable stance in your responses, feedback, and conversations with participants.

Remind participants to be:

- **Courageous** – vulnerable and brave in sharing their opinions and experiences, able to step outside of their comfort zones
- **Curious** – seeking deeper understanding of others and truly listening when others speak, engaging authentically with new people and ideas
- **Civil** – communicating respect and care for the other participants in their voices, posture, and words



The focus should be on authentic collaboration and belonging within the workplace. Rather than a punitive examination of an individual's faults, the conversation can be framed as a chance to reflect on how we can highlight our shared humanity.

A useful framework for inclusive conversations is the BRIDGE Framework below. (Source: [Inclusion on Purpose](#), Ruchika Tulshyan)

- Be uncomfortable
- Reflect on what you don't know
- Invite feedback
- Defensiveness doesn't help
- Grow from mistakes
- Expect change to take time people and ideas



SAMPLE AGENDA

- **Welcome attendees** and help them to get settled within the space.
- **Outline** the purpose and agenda of the event, explaining your goals for the discussion and giving some context for the film. If facilitating this discussion in a workplace, tie the purpose of the discussion to specific institutional and workplace culture goals.
- **Introductions:** ask participants to introduce themselves with their names, their pronouns, and their departments or job titles, if relevant.
- **Read** the **Letter from the Director**.
- **Conduct Before Viewing** activities.
- **Watch** the film.
- **Reflect** on the film using the discussion questions.
- **Choose** the **After Viewing** activities that fit your goals, context, and time limit. We recommend that you choose at least one of the first three themes that examine the issue, and at least one of the last two themes that point toward solutions.
- **Wrap up** by sharing **Supplemental Resources**.



BEFORE VIEWING

BACKGROUND

The statistics below are useful factual background for the upcoming discussion. You can share them with the group as a baseline understanding of some of the issues touched on in the film, or just use them for your reference.

85%

of Americans state that the tone and nature of political debate has gotten more negative and less respectful over the past few years.

(Source: [PEW Research](#))

59%

of Americans report that it's stressful and frustrating to talk about politics with people who disagree with their views.

(Source: [PEW Research](#))

53%

of Americans report not personally knowing anyone who is Muslim, and a similar share (52%) say they know "not much" or "nothing at all" about Islam.

(Source: [PEW Research](#))

1,617%

hate crimes against Muslims grew 1,617% from 2000 to 2001, directly after 9/11.

(Source: [FBI](#))

11%

of reported hate crimes increased from 2020 to 2021, the most recent year of FBI data, with 63% of these incidents related to race/ethnicity, 20% related to sexual orientation or gender identity, and 15% related to religion.

(Source: [FBI](#))

90%

of Republicans and Democrats strongly agree on six fundamental American values, yet only 30% believe that the other side shares those values.

(Source: [Starts With Us](#))

70%

of Americans believe they have more in common with one another than many people think.

(Source: [Harvard Kennedy School](#))

67%

of Americans are tired of political division and polarization.

(Source: [Hidden Tribes](#))

PRE-VIEWING ACTIVITY I



Write down three words to describe the state of current American society, in your opinion.

- Write the three words on a sticky note and share with the whole group or discuss with your peers.
- If you chose a word with a negative connotation, think of the opposite of the word you chose. Write it down.
- How different would the world be if American society could be characterized by these words instead? Reflect on this.

PRE-VIEWING ACTIVITY II

Choose one or more of the following exercises that align with your group and goals. The aim here is to acknowledge the fact that we often have preconceived notions—positive or negative—about groups without first hand familiarity with those groups.



LIST 5 THINGS you know about people of a different culture or religion from your own.

- Where did this knowledge come from?
- Does it come from meeting and talking with members of this group?



LIST 5 THINGS you know about Muslims/Islam.

- Where did this knowledge come from?
- Are you Muslim?
- Does it come from meeting and talking with Muslims?



LIST 5 THINGS you know about veterans and serving in the U.S. military.

- Where did this knowledge come from?
- Are you a member of the military?
- Does it come from meeting and talking with people serving in the U.S. military?

AFTER VIEWING



REFLECTING ON *STRANGER AT THE GATE*

Use the following discussion questions to elicit immediate reactions to and deepen understanding of the film directly after viewing. You can choose to ask these questions in a whole group format or pose a question and let participants discuss it in small groups before debriefing as a whole group.

- Sum up your reaction to the film in one word. Share it with your small group, the whole group, or in a [word cloud](#).
- As you were watching, how did you think McKinney's story would end? Reflect on the "twist" ending to this story.
- McKinney was accepted and treated kindly by the members of the Islamic Center of Muncie and especially by the Bahrami family, despite his violent intentions. What made them able to trust him, in your opinion?
- Is this story of kindness and human connection universal, or the exception to the rule, in your opinion?

EXPLICIT BIAS

A conscious preference for or against a group of people.

IMPLICIT BIAS

Implicit bias is a negative attitude, of which one is not consciously aware, against a specific social group. Internal preconceptions may be based on our backgrounds, upbringing, and other life experiences. Implicit bias can often run counter to our expressed beliefs or values, but still may affect how we interact with or perceive others. Preconceptions may be based on our backgrounds, upbringing, and other life experiences. Implicit bias can often run counter to our expressed beliefs or values, but still may affect how we interact with or perceive others.

(Source: APA)

FROM BIAS TO BELONGING

Guide participants through learning about explicit and implicit bias, acknowledging their own sources of bias, and thinking about ways to lessen bias using the film as an anchor. Ask the group to work through analyzing McKinney's bias together. For the second activity, don't force sharing. Make sure to give space for participants to reflect silently on their own implicit biases.

- > McKinney expressed many biased statements against Muslims and Islam in the film. Where do you think his explicit biases came from? How were they initially formed and why were they so strong?
- > What ultimately broke through his strong bias against Muslims and forced him to reconsider?
- > Think about your own implicit biases. Ask yourself: Do I hold stereotypes or assumptions about a particular social group, even if I don't consciously agree with these assumptions? Hold one example of implicit bias in your mind.
- > Think about the following: Where does this implicit bias come from? Family, upbringing, media or news depictions, peers, political rhetoric, somewhere else?
- > What would it take for you to overcome this implicit bias? How can you consciously force a change in your own internal biases?
- > Note that McKinney's mindset changed when he actually spent time with members of the group he was biased against. Is there a way that you can gain more familiarity with groups outside of your comfort zone?



*"It took eight weeks to
change my mind. It took
eight weeks to remove all of
that hatred."*

RICHARD "MAC" MCKINNEY

OTHERING

A phenomenon in which individuals or groups are treated as markedly different and inferior than the dominant social group, an us-versus-them mindset. Othering can lead to dehumanization, seeing the perceived other as less than human and not worthy of rights.

(Source: [Very Well Mind](#))

MICROAGGRESSION

Action that subtly and often unconsciously or unintentionally expresses a prejudiced attitude toward a member of a marginalized group.

(Source: [Merriam-Webster](#))

OTHERING

Explain the concept of othering, asking participants to connect McKinney's overt othering of Muslims with more subtle othering we see in political rhetoric and the media. Recognizing othering language is the first step toward decreasing group bias and discrimination.

- Do you think othering is prominent in our society today?
In what ways does McKinney paint Muslims as the other or less than human in **Stranger at the Gate**?
- Explain the concept of the paper target used in the film. Why would McKinney's commander teach him to imagine the enemy as a paper target?
- McKinney goes to the Islamic Center of Muncie to look for evidence that Muslims are killers. Do we often look for evidence that fits our preconceived notion of people? How can that warp our view?
- Often othering occurs due to the perception that the other threatens one's way of life, or takes scarce resources. Do you see that type of thinking in McKinney? In the media? In yourself?

FROM SHARED TRAUMA TO SHARED STRENGTH

Introduce participants to the concept of trauma, an emotional response to a distressing event or personal hardship. Understanding the effects of trauma can help us understand ourselves and others.

- Examine the shared trauma all of the film participants share.
 - Discuss the trauma each film subject has been through and how it affects how they view others, their level of trust, and their lives.
 - Bibi Bahrami
 - Richard "Mac" McKinney
 - Jomo Williams
 - Notice that Bahrami's experience in the refugee camp makes her more welcoming, caring, and open. How is that possible?
- What trauma do you carry around? How does it affect your interactions?
- How does carrying around trauma and hate physically and mentally affect us?



PERSPECTIVE SHIFT

- Ask each participant to discuss with a peer a time they have been marginalized, made to feel less than, othered, or made to suffer from a microaggression.
 - Don't respond right away, but attempt to feel deeply what they're feeling. See the event from their perspective and attempt to understand why it had such an impact. How could this have threatened their sense of belonging or humanity, even if it doesn't seem threatening to you?
 - Validate their feelings and experience.
 - Think about whether you have ever made someone feel marginalized. Examine your power in relation to the groups to which you belong. Sit with this discomfort; reflect on it.

FINDING CONNECTION

A major theme in **Stranger at the Gate** is the importance of community—both the affirming power of an accepting community and the grave consequences of feeling isolated. Guide participants in thinking about what community means to them and how they can actively build and participate in uplifting and supportive communities.



DISPLAY THIS PROMPT

WHAT DOES COMMUNITY
MEAN TO YOU?

Ask participants to come up with their definitions of community. What do people in a community do or not do? Answers may include care for one another, accept each other, support each other, not ostracize or turn away, trust each other, be like minded, or share the same goals.



DISCUSSION

- In **Stranger at the Gate**, McKinney was searching for a place to belong after leaving the military. How do you think isolation contributed to his actions?
- List a few communities that you belong to. Are these communities diverse? Why or why not?
- Do you consider your workplace a community? What could you do to bring the qualities of a community to the workplace?

MICRO-AFFIRMATION

A small acknowledgement of another person's value. A subtle act of inclusion, kindness, or recognition that can counter bias and enhance belonging.

(Source: [Bravely](#))



TRY IT

- Mirror the language a person uses to describe their identity.
- Publicly give a co-worker specific and sincere praise for an accomplishment.
- Refer to specifics of a past conversation to show that you listened and remembered.
- When someone isn't participating, take notice and encourage them. Invite someone to share their expertise or opinion.

"Today, tomorrow or next week, you might meet a stranger, someone who looks or thinks differently from you. It might be easy to ignore this person, to look the other way. Instead, I challenge you to smile. Ask their name. Learn a little about them. You might be surprised at what can happen."

BIBI BAHRAMI



WAYS TO BUILD COMMUNITY

- Volunteer.
- Join a community group or local organization.
- Start an ongoing conversation with a book club, gaming group, or other affinity group.

MOVING FORWARD

Use this section as a space to reflect on the learning of the session and think about concrete ways to take what you've learned into your daily life. Encourage participants to connect the dots between the various themes you've chosen to discuss, then share the resources that follow. Try to leave participants with actionable steps to build bridges rather than walls at work and at home.

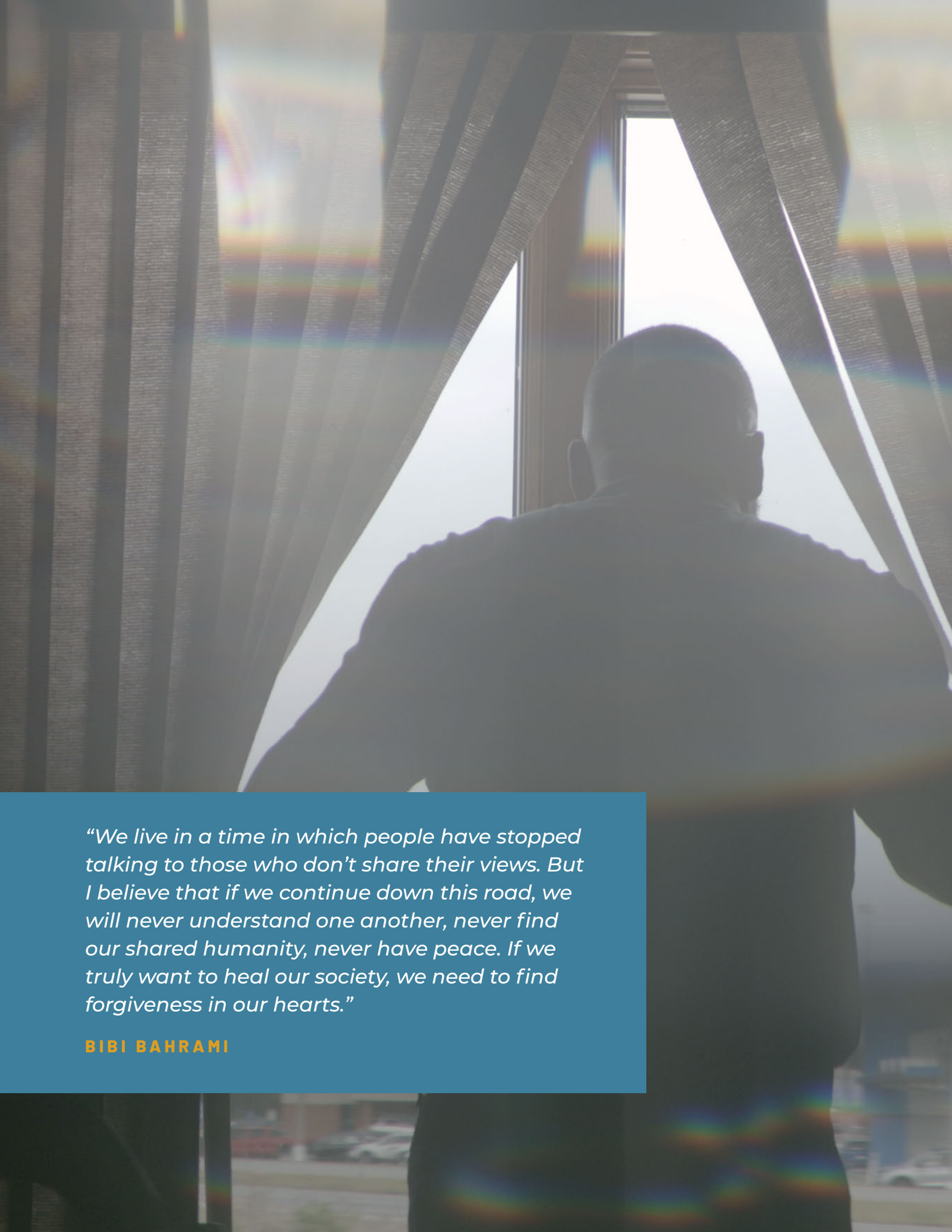
DISCUSSION

- What is one thing that you learned from **Stranger at the Gate** that you wish everyone could learn?
- What are you actively doing in your community to foster connection and reduce polarization and isolation?
- Set three goals for yourself based on this discussion. When it comes to bias, othering, bridging divides, and building inclusive communities at home and at work, where and how can you improve?



STEPS TO MOVE FORWARD

- **Learn** more about bridge building, a strategy that allows diverse groups to find common ground.
 - [Bridge USA](#)
 - [Civic Genius](#)
 - [Common Ground Committee](#)
- **Focus** on calling in rather than calling out
 - Access these tips from [Harvard](#) about having compassionate conversations with people who hold different views.
- **Practice** having civil conversations
 - Take the [Unify Challenge](#), a guided video conversation with an American who thinks, votes, or looks differently than you.
- **Join** or start an employee resource group (ERG)
 - ERGs are voluntary, employee-led affinity groups for coworkers based on interests, race, ethnicity, or other identity factors that help shape the policies and practices of the institution as well as foster inclusion. Here's a [guide](#) to starting one.

A person is seen from behind, looking out a window. The window is framed by dark, heavy curtains that are pulled back, revealing a bright, overexposed view outside. The person's silhouette is dark against the light coming from the window. The overall mood is contemplative and hopeful, with a rainbow-like light flare visible on the left side of the image.

“We live in a time in which people have stopped talking to those who don’t share their views. But I believe that if we continue down this road, we will never understand one another, never find our shared humanity, never have peace. If we truly want to heal our society, we need to find forgiveness in our hearts.”

BIBI BAHRAMI

SUPPLEMENTAL RESOURCES



ONLINE RESOURCES

- [Richard McKinney's journey from the brink of unspeakable evil to a life dedicated to peace and understanding](#)
- [*Stranger at the Gate: On How Love Conquered Hate*, CBS Sunday Morning](#)
- [How The Kindness of Strangers Stopped My Terror Attack](#)

OPINION: A STRANGER PLANNED TO BOMB MY MOSQUE. HE BECAME A MEMBER INSTEAD.

Washington Post · by Bibi Bahrami · January 25, 2023

Bibi Bahrami is a co-founder of the Islamic Center of Muncie, Indiana, and the subject of the Oscar-nominated documentary *Stranger at the Gate*, executive produced by Malala Yousafzai.

Several years ago, an [unfamiliar man showed up at my little mosque](#), a squat brick building on the side of a four-lane highway in Muncie, Indiana. He had a large U.S. Marine Corps logo and a sketch of a small skull with a lightning bolt tattooed on his right arm. His face was flush, he barely made eye contact, and his fists were clenched. He seemed angry.

Naturally, we saw potential danger. In these days of intense cultural division, [hatred against Muslims](#) is [palpable](#), and our places of worship have been the [targets](#) of terrible crimes. But we also sensed vulnerability in this stranger. My husband, an Afghan refugee and a gentle physician, welcomed the man with a heartfelt hug. Later, I sat alone with him in our mosque library—to share a smile and ask his name, to offer comfort and show him respect.

Why, you might ask, would I put myself in this position? When I was a young girl growing up in Afghanistan, I met troubled men like this at the homeless shelter run by my father. And when I fled the war in Afghanistan to a refugee camp in Pakistan as a teenager, I cared for many needy people. I have always believed in the idea that we must welcome the stranger, the person in need. And that if we search for common ground with all those we meet, we will discover our shared humanity, and we will all be better for it.

As the stranger and I sat on a green vinyl couch, surrounded by leather-bound books, he finally started to make eye contact. I learned that his name was Richard “Mac” McKinney, that he had served 25 years in the military, and that he had a wife and daughter. Over the next few weeks, Mac began making regular visits to the mosque, joining us for meals and sharing stories about his family and his time in the military.

I continually looked for ways to help him feel valued by entrusting him with responsibilities around the mosque: leading meetings, participating in prayers, even standing by the door as our resident security guard. I could tell this gave him a sense of purpose. Not long after that, he joined our community of about 200 by becoming a member of the mosque.

It wasn't until months later that I heard unsettling rumors. Some congregants claimed they'd heard that when Mac first came to the mosque, he was on a reconnaissance mission. That he'd [built a bomb](#) to blow up the mosque and murder us.

I knew immediately what I needed to do. I invited Mac to my house for a meal of traditional Afghan food: homemade bread, chicken, kebabs, rice, eggplant, a green yogurt dip seasoned with cilantro and lime. He devoured the food. When he was done, I looked him in the eye.

"Is it true, Richard?" I asked. "Were you planning to kill us?"

He looked down. He was ashamed but answered honestly. He confessed that when he had first arrived at the mosque, he had planned to murder us by blowing up the building with an IED he had built himself.

"What were you thinking, Brother Richard?"

He explained that in the military, he had been at war with Muslims for years, and that he had developed a deep hatred in his heart. But he went on to say that the way we had treated him, with compassion and kindness, had changed his mind. He said we had given him a place to belong. We had shown him what true humanity is about.

Of course, these stories don't always go this way. In 2015, at the Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church in Charleston, South Carolina, Dylann Roof entered a Bible study as a seemingly curious participant but quickly transformed into a terrifying mass murderer, [killing nine church members](#). Events like this are horrifying. But I refuse to give up hope.

We live in a time in which people have stopped talking to those who don't share their views. It's easy to despair. But I believe that if we continue down this road, we will never understand one another, never find our shared humanity, never have peace. If we truly want to heal our society, we need to find forgiveness in our hearts.

That's why, in the end, our community chose to forgive Richard and allow him to remain. In fact, he not only stayed with us but also became president of our little brick mosque on the edge of the highway.

I realize that not everyone will be faced with a situation as extreme as ours. But today, tomorrow, or next week, you might meet a stranger, someone who looks or thinks differently from you. It might be easy to ignore this person, to look the other way. Instead, I challenge you to smile. Ask their name. Learn a little about them. You might be surprised at what can happen.

STRANGER AT THE GATE

MALALA YOUSAFZAI ON ENTERTAINMENT'S "POWER TO REVEAL OUR SHARED HUMANITY"

The Hollywood Reporter · by Malala Yousafzai · February 27, 2023

Bibi Bahrami is a co-founder of the Islamic Center of Muncie, Indiana, and the subject of the Oscar-nominated documentary *Stranger at the Gate*, executive produced by Malala Yousafzai.

People often ask why I, an activist for education and women's rights, want to produce films and TV shows. It's because I believe in the power of entertainment to connect people—whether that's across the living room or across the world.

I've seen it in my own life. Growing up in Pakistan, I was aware of high tensions between our government and India's leaders. But that didn't stop us from falling in love with Bollywood films and obsessing over actors like Shah Rukh Khan and Kajol. When we moved to the U.K., my mother didn't speak English. But she found she could share a laugh with her British neighbors over Mr. Bean's physical comedy. At Oxford, I spent too many hours watching *The Big Bang Theory* or *Rick and Morty* with my friends.

Stories have the power to reveal our shared humanity and connect people across cultures, religions, and countries. They can also teach us about ourselves, something I experienced the first time I saw **Stranger at the Gate**, a short documentary nominated for an Academy Award this year.

The film tells the story of a man named Richard "Mac" McKinney who decides to bomb a local mosque in Muncie, Indiana. After retiring from a 25-year career in the U.S. Marine Corps, he was suffering from PTSD and left without a purpose for his life. During combat tours in Afghanistan and Iraq, Mac's commanding officers encouraged him to dehumanize his targets. So when his young daughter tells him about a woman in a hijab picking up her son from school, he feels driven to protect his family from "the enemy"—their Muslim neighbors.

In the film, Mac recounts building an IED and going to the small, red-brick mosque on a reconnaissance mission. There he meets Saber and Bibi Bahrami, an Afghan couple who came to Muncie as refugees in 1986, built a thriving medical practice, and co-founded the mosque. Saber welcomes Mac and invites him to join the congregation for fellowship. Bibi sits next to him and asks Mac about his life and his family.

Over the next few weeks, Mac continues to visit the mosque, getting to know the men, women, and children who worship there. Sensing his need for purpose, Bibi asks him to lead meetings, participate in prayers, and even stand by the door as a security guard. Then, after the FBI searches his home, the congregation learns the truth: Mac was planning to murder them.

Instead of recoiling in fear and disgust, instead of casting him out, Bibi invites Mac to the Bahrami home for dinner, a traditional Afghan feast of chicken, homemade bread, rice, eggplant, and more. As they share a meal, she has only one question: “What were you thinking, Brother Richard?”

Your initial reaction might be like mine: Non-Muslim people need to get past their fear of our communities and educate themselves about Islam. But this documentary is saying so much more—it is calling each of us to consider our shared humanity.

Everywhere we look today, we see people entrenching themselves so deeply in their beliefs that they can justify hatred of others. This hostility is not limited to one race, religion, or creed, to one country or conflict, to one political party or social movement, to one gender or generation.

As Bibi wrote recently in *The Washington Post*, “We live in a time in which people have stopped talking to those who don’t share their views... if we continue down this road, we will never understand one another, never find our shared humanity, never have peace.”

I have experienced the damage unchecked division can cause. At 15 years old, I was shot in the head for speaking against the Pakistani Taliban’s ban on girls’ education. The assailant wasn’t a white soldier like Mac. He was a young man, not much older than me, a Muslim from my own community. He, like so many others, had been led to believe that his narrow view of the world was the right one. That his Islam was better than mine. That the role of women and girls he accepted was the one we should all be forced to practice.

When people ask me what I would say to the man who shot me, I tell them I would forgive him. I know how destructive anger, revenge, and hatred can be. I will always choose love.

It may sound simplistic or trite to say, “Show kindness to those who are different from you. Forgive people who hurt you.” But people like Bibi spend years cultivating compassion in their own hearts. Over time, they learn to be receptive, not reactive. They practice acceptance, not alienation.

They do this because they know it works. In the film, Mac says Bibi and others at the mosque showed him “true humanity” and changed his life. He found a community and even served as president of the mosque for two years. He found a purpose, too—today he travels the country telling his story and helping others move from hate to understanding.

At different points in their lives, both Bibi and Mac needed help. Without the Muncie community that welcomed Afghan refugees in the 1980s, the Bahrami family might not have survived. Without the Bahrami family, Mac might have killed dozens of innocent people. Without Mac, someone struggling with hatred and rage today might never hear that it’s possible to be forgiven and live a life of love.

If you’re reading this, I hope that you’ll watch **Stranger at the Gate** and begin to understand Mac and Bibi’s life-saving message: To believe that people can change—and to be willing to change ourselves—is our best hope for a better world.

STRANGER AT THE GATE

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