

## *Patient Perspective*

### **My Self-Portrait**

M. A. Khan

Department of Medicine, Case Western University School of Medicine, Cleveland, USA

My self-portrait tries to represent multiple aspects of my life and me. I painted it in 1987 using acrylic paint, and it took me 6 months to first conceptualise it in my mind and 6 weeks to finish it.

It is not easy to fully explain all that goes into forming such an artwork. Just to explain its major aspects in simplest terms, this painting can be subdivided into three vertical components or columns. These columns convey different themes utilising my middle name ASIM (which is my given name) written in either the Latin or the Arabic script, the two most widely used alphabetic writing systems in the world.

The first two letters 'A' and 'S' in the column on the left are drawn to represent Ankylosing Spondylitis, the illness I have suffered from since age 12. The red colour in the background indicates the inflammatory nature of the disease, and the letter 'S' is showing the spinal curvature and fusion. The letter 'i' and its background also convey the inflammation. The four letters together convey 'AS I'M', i.e., 'AS I am', to portray 'me and my AS'. The last two letters 'I' and 'M' depict my immigration to the United States, and 'M' with its green background also indicates that I am proud to be a Muslim. An abbreviated version of the US flag is shown with its star shining brightly; as a busy physician I did not have time to make 50 stars and 13 stripes.

The middle column consists of the four letters in lowercase and drawn in such a way as to create my profile which gives the impression of active vitality. The first letter 'a' forms a sort of an enclosure or a halo encircling as well as forming my head and face. My nose and ear are drawn realistically, and my moustache and balding head had no grey hair in 1987, the year I made this portrait. The circle at the site of

the eye conveys my recurrent bout of acute iritis, and the eye is transposed to the side of the head. This is meant to point out my inability to turn my neck (by conveying that a laterally placed eye would have eliminated the limited field of vision resulting from the ankylosed spine). The next letter 's' is shown forming the spine with syndesmophytes, while 'i' forms the lumbar spine joining the fourth letter 'm' that forms the pelvic and femoral bones, drawn in such a way as to convey mobility despite bilateral hip arthroplasties. The heart in the fused thoracic cage is drawn in a transparent manner to indicate my straightforward nature, always trying to tell it as it is, and not hiding my feelings.

The vertical component on the right side consists of the four Arabic letters (written from above down) that comprise my middle name. The first letter is written in such a way as to also form a crescent, which, along with the green background, helps make the flag of the country where I grew up (Pakistan). The crescent and star represent my religion, Islam, and the star is faded as compared to the star on the US flag to depict the unfortunate current situation of the Muslim world. I hope and pray that one day, God willing, the star of Pakistan and the Muslim world will shine as brightly as that of the US. The second letter depicts that I am a straightforward and upright individual, in fact a 'straight arrow' even though my spine is stooped. Part of the third letter appears floating in water, as if it is trying to keep its head above the water even though some of the water seems to have spilled over into its cup-shaped component. This is meant to signify that we all struggle in our lives and overcome hardships in order to succeed in pursuing happy and productive lives. The fourth letter happens to resemble the femoral prosthesis and is shown imbedded in white cement, reflecting my bilateral hip arthroplasties.



Fig. 1. Self-portrait.