

My regular visits to Turkey have given me the opportunity to compare my experiences and background with different cultures and socio-economic environments. This has given me insights into the political and social cultures in the United States and Turkey. In my travels, I have often met with many folks who are curious about the United States-often presuming many things or harboring stereotypes, misconceptions, and strong opinions about the United States- and vice versa. Being asked to explain social patterns, culture, politics, or religion to people in the opposite country puts me in an interesting spot. I found that when in Turkey I would become an advocate for the United States, a nationalist of sorts, just to counter some of the hate and/or discontent harbored towards the government of the United States. When in the United States the situation would be reversed. I found myself defending the Turkish government as well as popular political and cultural views that Turks held in an attempt to explain the complexity of the situation. I felt obliged to be a voice for the other, independent of my own views.

I believe that this is the vantage point that we as community members and actors in society need to be cognizant of and try to emulate. Without being able to step back from your own experiences and opinions and see the validity of the other side(s) conversation, understanding, and respect come to a halt. Take the Israeli-Palestinian divide as an example. Studying at Washington University in Saint Louis I know many who remember splendid memories in Israel in their childhoods or travels. For others, the conflict and divide brings about memories of pain or hatred. Often, each party does not see these different experiences which then leads to polarization and mis-understanding. When we are able to respect and connect with our peers in program like the Ibrahim Leadership and Dialogue Program it facilitates open dialogue and understanding.

The method to doing this first starts with the experience that is gained from a program such the Ibrahim program. As I studied Arabic through the Critical Language Scholarship this past summer I was exposed to Omani language and culture. My experiences with the Critical Language Scholarship (CLS) can be best summarized by a well-known philosophical thought experiment called "Mary's room". The basic premise revolves around an individual named Mary who knows any and every piece of physical knowledge with regards to human vision and color. (Wavelengths, refractions, etc.) However, she has lived in a black-and-white room her whole life never having actually seen color. What will happen to Mary's understanding of color upon being released from her black-and-white room and into the world of color? The argument is that Mary will learn something new upon seeing color through her own eyes. Until participating in CLS my relationship with the Arabic language and culture had been quite similar to Mary's relationship with color.

In the confines of formal class study, my relationship with the Middle East was summarized by the black-and-white pages of Al-Kitaab-my Arabic textbook. It is not until studying the language in an Arabic-speaking country that black-and-white content became colored with meaning. I was given an opportunity to live out my Arabic studies. Words I memorized, customs I read about, and grammar I absorbed were given new meaning and substance linking formal studies outside the Middle East and North Africa to habits, customs, objects that I interacted with daily in the region.

This experience left me wanting more. I know that my experience in Oman was only a small part of a much larger and deeper culture. I hope to color more of my studies through

Ibrahim and bring these experiences back to my university and greater community. From there I want to be able to properly advocate for the voices that are not represented no matter how large or small the community, club, group, or city.

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