

Abrahamic Reflections

The 2016 Interfaith Fellows' Journal



Dr. Ulrich
Rosenhagen

Halle
Siebert

Kyra
Fox

Omar
Jandal

Najeeha
Khan

Eva
Bernstein

Soo Gyum
Kim

Samantha
Rosenbloom

Mehak
Qureshi

Georgia
Black

Joshua
Epstein

Ahmad
Muezzin

The Lubar Institute for the Study of the Abrahamic Religions
University of Wisconsin–Madison

The Interfaith Fellows are a selected group of students at the University of Wisconsin–Madison. Representing the Abrahamic faiths of Islam, Judaism, and Christianity, the students meet weekly with Lubar Institute staff to talk about religion, participate in campus and community activities, and develop interfaith leadership skills.

This *Journal* collects their end-of-year reflections on their involvement with the group.

Views expressed here are those of the individual students and are not statements on behalf of the Lubar Institute for the Study of the Abrahamic Religions.

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A Letter from the Associate Director *Dr. Ulrich Rosenhagen, Pr.*

A few weeks ago, I was feeling a bit sad, clicking the “send” button for an email inviting this year’s Fellows to our last meeting. There was a sense of inevitability in the air, for this is the last group of Lubar Institute Interfaith Student Fellows. I feel those same blues writing these lines today.

For almost ten years, I have been teaching undergraduate students at the Lubar Institute. But now the Institute is poised to reorganize, change its name, and expand its paradigm beyond the Abrahamic traditions. The Lubar Institute will close in June 2016, but will come to new life in 2017 as the University of Wisconsin–Madison’s Center for Religion and Global Citizenship. The core vision and mission of Professor Charles L. Cohen, the Institute’s founder, and Sheldon and Marianne Lubar, who generously funded the endeavor, will live on. Just as when the Lubar Institute was founded in the aftermath of 9/11, the new Center’s agenda to practice interreligious dialogue and understanding on this campus continues to be sorely needed.

But before we rush ahead too quickly, I want to reflect on the life of the Lubar Institute. I hate to be morbid, but I can’t help but think of these words as a funeral oration. Perhaps that’s okay. After all, words at the side of a grave often summarize the span of a lifetime. The Lubar Institute had one heck of a life, especially when we

consider the extraordinary work of our students.

Over the years, the Lubar Institute has trained about 300 students at UW–Madison to become more knowledgeable about the different Abrahamic traditions and to be more articulate about religion in a world of religious diversity and pluralism. With such training, the Lubar Institute became an active, public player in the growing field of interreligious dialogue.

For me, the centerpiece of this training has been the call for “a religious pluralism beyond tolerance which actively attempts to understand the other” (Diana Eck). I wanted to prepare our students so that they could play an important part in working out the mechanics of this new religious pluralism within civil society. I saw our students forming an Abrahamic avant-garde which might serve as leaders in the global and pluralistic world of tomorrow. Our programs addressed the students’ particular role in their college environment and sought to train them for potential future leadership after college.

I was captivated by a general con-

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cept that has increasingly gained traction in the contemporary scholarship on interreligious and intercultural learning. In this scholarly discourse, the idea of “interreligious competence” has been widely used to explain the goal of interreligious education. Interreligious competence assumes the continuous growth and development of one’s self without subsuming the other under one’s own religious and epistemological categories. The religious other doesn’t need to assimilate, but can be accepted in his and her otherness. For that reason, the concept of interreligious competence not only emphasizes learning about other religions, but also learning *from* other religions in order to evolve and flourish as individual.

To achieve such interreligious or, following the paradigm of the Lubar Institute, Abrahamic competence, our programs drew on some very different dimensions of learning and included a good variety of appropriate methodological and pedagogical tools. We refrained from too much emphasis on cognitive learning. In our attempt to form future Abrahamic leaders, we decided to take a more holistic learning approach, which not only challenges the mind but also the heart and hands of our students.

The Lubar Institute offered two different student programs under my supervision. Students could actively participate in our Interfaith Student Forum, a diverse group of students that met once a month through the academic year. The Forum discussed anything from high theology (Are we worshipping the same God?) to religious practice (How do you pray the Rosary? How do you prostrate? What do you do on your holiday?) to controversial topics like the 2005 cartoons of the Prophet Muhammad published in a Danish newspaper, or the stereotyping of Muslims and Jews in American pop culture.

Each spring, the Forum members attended a Friday prayer at a Madison mosque, a Shabbat service at UW Hillel, and Sunday worship at a church. These three visits, followed by intense discussion, were always a highlight of the program for me and many of the students.

The Lubar Institute awarded a number of annual Fellowships. The Lubar Interfaith Student Fellows became our core group of students, meeting together with me weekly, and following a usually tight syllabus. The Fellows organized talks and events on and off campus, led the Forum, set up movie screenings, managed the campus-wide Muslim-Jewish Volunteer Initiative, and conducted interfaith social service initiatives. This year, the Fellows piloted an arts-based dialogue program that led to a collaboratively created artwork. They also taught sixth graders from Cherokee Middle School about the Abrahamic traditions and the basics of interreligious dialogue.

As in past years, it was a sincere pleasure to work with these exceptionally thoughtful, curious, and gifted students. They taught me to better appreciate the distinctiveness of the Abrahamic traditions. Their openness and willingness to share their own traditions and thoughts trained my eye to better see the similarities and differences between the Abrahamic traditions. I am confident they learned as much *from* each other as they learned about each other.

Together with Professor Cohen, Karen Turino, Meg Hamel, Sari Judge, and the many other people over the years who have helped run the Lubar Institute for the Study of the Abrahamic Religions, I am unbelievably thankful for our students. We have been their students as much as they have been ours. ●



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My time thus far as a Lubar Interfaith Student Fellow has been extremely rewarding. I have learned about the foundations of the other Abrahamic faiths and my own set of beliefs. I have revealed to myself the judgments I did not know I had about religion. The Lubar Fellowship has put interfaith dialogue and interaction at the forefront of my mind not only during our weekly meetings, but also throughout my week as I see and experience religion in my everyday life.

I thought that Bruce Feiler's *Abraham: A Journey to the Heart of Three Faiths* was an excellent kick-off for the dialogue between the Fellows. Feiler not only gave background information that was new and interesting, but he really delved deep into some of the most controversial issues that interfaith dialogue faces today. His retelling of visits to Jerusalem and the Cave of the Patriarchs (and Matriarchs) in Hebron were especially engaging and prompted me to think about how religion and interfaith dialogue are critical to the tension in Israel and Palestine.

As we began our dialogue together and spoke about Abraham, it was

particularly fun to be able to share the meanings and traditions of the holidays that consume the beginning of the Jewish liturgical year. It really was almost every week that I, along with the other Jewish Fellows, could share the holiday we were observing. While it made me feel proud and excited to be sharing my religion—and even more so my personal traditions and experiences of the Jewish holidays—I did feel as though it set up an interesting dynamic in which Judaism took up a good deal of space in the beginning of our sessions together. Although I haven't felt that this dynamic has played out throughout the semester, I have won-

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I am so glad we did the art-based dialogue as a part of our process and I am looking forward to using this experience as a jumping off point to make our weekly discussions and monthly Forum meetings more personal, creative, and genuine.

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dered how Fellows of other faiths felt about it.

Additionally, I have really enjoyed the Undergraduate Forum sessions we have had so far. While it feels like we have had so few, because they are only once a month, I have found both my involvement as a participator and a facilitator in the Forum meetings to be equally interesting and exciting. Working with a small group of women to lead the Forum session on “gender and race within religion” last month was really thought-provoking for me. I have always been interested in issues of gender and race, and really appreciated the push the Lubar Institute gave me to think about these issues alongside my religious identity. While I knew some of how gender and racial topics intersected with Judaism, I learned so much by researching and preparing for the presentation. Hearing from the other group members about how they felt their faiths treated women, homosexuality, racial minorities, and more was really fascinating.

The past month in the Lubar Fellowship has been essential to the relationships I have formed within the group. We spoke extensively of our personal and collective reflections on the art-based dialogue on religion in our meeting. I want to echo what we spoke about, and what has been specifically meaningful for me in this process. I felt as though our time in the Wheelhouse Studio played an important role in developing my relationships with other Fellows. While our more formal discussions in the Humanities Building and in the Forum were interesting and informative, the transformation of being

in an art studio and being prompted to use creativity and partnership as Fellows felt unique and inspiring. I am so glad we did the art-based dialogue as a part of our process and I am looking forward to using this experience as a jumping off point to make our weekly discussions and monthly Forum meetings more personal, creative, and genuine.

Despite my excitement about and appreciation for the topics covered and the experiences we have shared thus far, I think that the Fellowship has lacked some things. While acknowledging our serious lack of time, I really wish we had more of a chance to consider and discuss current events and societal issues relevant to interfaith dialogue. Specifically, the current climate of Islamophobia in the United States and around the world has been extremely upsetting and confusing for me. When I read articles or hear friends and family talking about these issues, I am usually quick to form my opinion, condemning acts of prejudice and hoping for a larger segment of society to speak out against the connections made between acts of terror or hate and religion. However, I too often fail to recognize my privilege and the fact that I have an outside perspective on these issues. As a white Jew in America, I feel as though I face very little persecution and feel rather privileged in the places where I have grown up and go to school. I have the Lubar Institute Fellowship as an amazing opportunity to broaden my horizons. I can ask of and (more importantly) listen to the voices of other faiths and how they feel as individuals grouped in a collective that

is being criticized and dehumanized in the media. I know issues such as these are deeply intertwined into the political spectrum, which many people want to stay far away from. However, I think it is now more than ever relevant and important that the Lubar Institute be a space for these hard conversations.

With this feeling of a lack for harder conversations, I have a few goals for myself as the Lubar Fellowship continues throughout the year. First, I hope I can step up as a Fellow and ask the tough questions. We spoke, specifically in the Fellows group, at the beginning of the year that we wanted to create a space in which we were “comfortably uncomfortable.” I think it is totally reasonable that it has taken me, and maybe others, until recently to feel totally comfortable in the group. I feel at ease and even eager to ask questions about general or personal traditions and laws within the faiths. However, I want to push myself to go outside my comfort zone to ask questions and share my beliefs about political and societal issues that reflect inner or interreligious conflicts.

Furthermore, I want to make more

of an effort to talk and see the other Fellows and Forum members outside of the scheduled meeting times. As I mentioned previously, I have really enjoyed getting to know the other members of the Lubar Institute’s interfaith student groups, and I can only deepen these friendships if I make an effort outside of our weekly dialogues. The few times I have sat down with others from the Fellowship or Forum, I have really enjoyed myself and learned a lot about the other person. Sitting down for coffee or going out for ice cream furthers these relationships and helps to create the spaces for hard conversations in which we can feel “comfortably uncomfortable.”

I am eager to use the educational tools and the relationships I have formed in the Lubar Institute’s student groups to expand interfaith dialogue or even just interactions with our religious communities and throughout campus. Even though I feel as though my time as a Fellow is still just beginning, this experience has already given me valuable skills and perspectives to consider in being a well-informed and compassionate individual in society.

SECOND REFLECTION

My participation as a Lubar Fellow continues to be extremely meaningful as the academic year goes on. In the past few months, I feel as though we have gone steps further than just getting to know one another, and establishing a relationship, to a point at which we are working together as a team. Since our fall semester ended, I have had a num-

ber of experiences and opportunities to engage in interfaith and intercultural discussion and action and have used my time in Lubar as a major resource in navigating these experiences.

Over winter break I was on a program in Israel through the Shalom Hartman Institute in Jerusalem. Jewish students from 12 different college

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campuses came together to hear lectures, study Jewish texts, and talk with one another at a seminar focused on Jewish values and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. This was an amazing opportunity and allowed me to make connections between my faith and an issue that often feels at odds with my Jewish identity. In fact, something that I really took away from this seminar was the lack of recognition of faith that seems to be in the political sphere when discussing the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

After hearing a talk from an Israeli negotiator who touched on the issue of a lack of understanding of “the other’s” faith and spirituality in negotiations, I found myself reflecting on my experiences as a Lubar Fellow. I thought to myself how strange it was that I have been engaged in discussion and political action surrounding the Israeli-Palestinian conflict for years, but that I had never bothered to pick up the Qur’an. While I had always been curious and eager to learn about Muslim traditions and practices, I knew very little about the roots of Islam. Of course I cannot speak for the Jews or Muslims at large, but I think that making an effort to understand the similarities and differences within our faiths, as we do as Lubar Fellows, is a crucial role in the prospect of peace.

Since returning from winter break, the Fellows have been a comforting and empowering group to be in. Although the news that the Lubar Institute is in its final year was sad and frustrating to hear, I do feel as though it has pushed me as a Lubar Fellow to prioritize this type of discourse on campus. Furthermore, I feel that as a group we were

reminded how important it is to be doing what we are doing in the Lubar Institute. We felt it as our obligation to make sure this Fellowship continues for future students to take part in. With this in mind, I have been pleasantly overwhelmed with the cross-cultural, interfaith, and coexistence events on campus that we individually and collectively have taken responsibility for.

When I was asked by a staff member at Hillel to help facilitate a conversation about coexistence, I was inspired to undertake this responsibility because of the conversations we had been having in the Fellows’ group. Although it is hard sometimes to balance and prioritize all the different aspects of being a student, the idea of not having a program like the Lubar Fellows in action made me feel all the more responsible to initiate and execute conversations across people on campus who would not normally interact.

In addition to the feelings of inspiration I have felt over the past weeks, I have recently felt very supported by the Lubar Institute community after an anti-Semitic incident on campus. After hearing and reading about swastikas being printed and posted on the door of a Jewish student in a University Residence Hall, I was upset and disappointed in the UW community. I was so pleased to see that my friends from the Lubar Institute had posted on Facebook condemning this behavior and intolerance. Not only did I feel comforted knowing my non-Jewish friends cared deeply about this issue, but I also felt an additional sense of purpose in the Lubar Fellowship, as it is clearly needed on the campus.

I am really looking forward to the continuing conversations and projects that we as Lubar Fellows will have over the next few months. With our established friendships and understanding of each other and the foundations of our faiths, I think that we are having deeper and more personal discussions. Furthermore, I am really excited to continue planning and ultimately executing our program about religions and

interfaith relationships for local middle-school students. I think it is really interesting to hear from other Fellows and think for myself what is important to present to these kids about our faiths, and what message we want to send them home with. I am motivated to continue these next few months as a Fellow with an open mind and passion to continue and expand interfaith discussion on campus.

THIRD REFLECTION

Participating as a Lubar Institute Interfaith Student Fellow was one of the highlights of my past year. I enjoyed creating a community of people who cared about one another, wanted to learn from each other, and wanted to help our campus improve and grow in the way we talk about and include religion. Especially in the past few weeks, as instances of hate and bias have become more frequent (or more reported), I find myself thinking about the Lubar Institute and just how important our dialogue and community is.

I am especially proud of the event that the Lubar Fellows planned and executed for sixth graders from Cherokee Middle School about the three Abrahamic religions. Although planning was an extra task in all of our already busy lives, I found the process leading up to it and the event itself to be extremely rewarding. It was a challenging experience to think about what we as young adults wanted to teach a group of sixth graders—in just an hour and a half—about our respective religions, how they work together, and why we

believe interfaith dialogue is so crucial in our society. I was impressed with the students' maturity and curiosity to learn about religions that were unfamiliar to them, and their consideration and appreciation at the end of the program gave me hope for the future of our society.

While this event was a huge success in my mind, I did feel as though the time we put into preparing and completing the program took away from our process and discussions as Fellows. As we spoke about in our reflection together, I was really eager in the beginning of the year to get to the point where as Fellows we would be ready to have challenging conversations about sensitive and relevant issues like politics and the world today. I had thought that, as spring began, we would have been able to have hard conversations, but, instead, we used our time to plan the event with the sixth graders. While it was meaningful to put on this event, I wish we had chosen either one project or the other (sixth grade event, or the art project) to allow for more time to

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focus on our conversations and growth as a group.

In general, I hope that, in the future, the Lubar Fellows and Forum members will continually push themselves to enter the zone of being “comfortably uncomfortable.” We spoke about this notion in the beginning of the year, that we hoped we always would have respect for each other and create a safe space, and that we would also challenge one another and help each other learn new things by questioning old beliefs. While I don’t think we dismissed this goal entirely, I feel a bit unfulfilled ending the year knowing that, for the most part, I was “comfortably comfortable.” I think that the Lubar Fellowship is an extraordinary opportunity to push boundaries and have controversial discussions. I wish I had taken more initiative to start these conversations and give them a space to unfold on campus.

While I am disappointed that there will be no formal Lubar Institute in the future, I am eager to see how the development of interfaith dialogue continues on campus in the coming years. I believe that interfaith cooperation and discussion will be a great addition to our campus’s Multicultural Student Center. Furthermore, I am excited to have the opportunity as Lubar “graduates” to take on the responsibility of continuing interfaith dialogue on campus next year. I hope to run some sort of year-long program with the other Fellows, similar to our Lubar Forum, in which we can choose topics of conversation, including current events on campus, in the United States, or around the world, and bring people together to meet, discuss, and bridge gaps. With

the support of the Multicultural Student Center and our respective faith centers/organizations I think this is entirely possible and, more importantly, necessary for our campus climate.

Regarding how being a Fellow influenced my relationship to my own faith, I think that it made me much more aware and critical of how the Jewish community on campus and elsewhere represent themselves, and how members of other religions, both on and off campus, view Judaism. Experiences such as comparing and contrasting religious traditions and laws, and attending the town hall in response to the anti-Semitic incident on campus, brought to light how I felt about the larger Jewish community and its interaction with society. It was at times hard to feel as though I and the other Jewish fellows were representing Judaism at large. Although I have always been and will continue to be proud to be Jewish, I found myself embarrassed at how the Jewish community on campus desired the support from other minority groups on campus but was not always there in solidarity when incidents of hate and bias were targeted toward Muslims, Blacks, LGBTQ people, sexual assault survivors, and more. I have always thought that standing up for the rights and respect of all people was an extremely Jewish value at its core, and my hope is that the Jewish community at the University of Wisconsin, and nationally, continues to uphold this value and stand in solidarity with others experiencing discrimination.

I believe that the biggest thing I got out of being a part of the Lubar Fellowship this year was the creation of a

community. I think that through Lubar I was reminded of the humanity of religion. When people talk about religion, we often refer to the spiritual aspect and might even exclusively think about God, traditions, and laws. However, the Lubar Institute reminded me of my favorite part about religion: the community that encompasses, cherishes, and brings religion to life. When we see the news and read that the “Jews” have said this, that the “Muslims” have done that, and the “Christians” think this, it is far too easy to forget the faces and individuals that make up those extremely diverse groups. Being a part of the Lubar Institute community and acting as a Lubar Fellow means to me that, in the future, when I hear others make generalizations, when I read articles that perpetuate stereotypes and falsehoods,

and when I myself make the mistake of grouping an entire culture, race, ethnicity, or religion together, I will stop and think about the members of that group as individuals rather than as a single mass. I am so happy and honored to have a community to support me in this endeavor and to whom I can reach out to ensure that I am an informed and open-minded citizen.

I am grateful to everyone who works at the Lubar Institute for the opportunity to participate in the Lubar Fellowship this past year, especially Ulrich, who lead us in the process and created this essential space on campus. However, most importantly, I thank the other fellows, who have become close friends of mine, for opening themselves up, engaging, and prioritizing the need for interfaith cooperation. ●

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Georgia Black

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Recently, concerns about safety and comfort have been at the forefront of my mind. “More than usual, I have been thinking about how much a sense of security contributes to our individual peace and comfort. We all seek safety at every moment of our lives.”

I have had cause to think about my need for safety more than usual, not because I myself have been at risk, but because in recent months I have seen, heard, read, and shared more danger among my fellow students than I have in my time at the University of Wisconsin-Madison previously. With Black lives being threatened daily across the country, and heated movements underway on other college campuses, such as the University of Missouri, I am watching fellow students being torn away from the essential needs that our bodies and souls demand to be successful. I am privileged in so many ways, and I hate to watch students hunger for a sense of security that seems unreachable.

While students of color grasp at safety in their homes and place of learning on the University of Missou-

ri campus, I know that they and other students worry about their safety at University of Wisconsin-Madison. As someone heavily involved in sexual assault survivor activism on our campus, I am accustomed to sitting in rooms full of lawyers and investigators listening to students retell their stories, baring their raw pain in front of strangers who pick and pry. I am also hearing from my Muslim friends about the fear they have just existing in their skin — especially during a time of extreme racial and extremist profiling following the November 2015 attacks on Paris. I mention these incidents, because they have caused me to consider basic security. I think about how learning can happen only when safety is present. How can students achieve their intentions in their education when their

emotional health suffers because they are scared?

How can students of color, of minority religions, survivors of violence, and all other students feel prepared to face their campus and world while bearing in mind the danger they risk by participating? Ideally, our campuses would be secure, but they are reflections of the world, and therefore dangerous. The solution to continuing education while caring for students' emotional health lies in intentionally created safe spaces, and that is how the Lubar Interfaith Student Fellows group functions for me.

What I have found in the last few months is that the Lubar Interfaith Fellows are a safe space. In the beginning of the semester, we listed our needs for the group together, and have manifested our desires by our intentional community-building. Now, in just a short time, we have become a gathering of students who are meeting together to have hard conversations made possible by the safe context we have created. As Lubar Fellows, we have similar values, rooted first in our fervor for the Abrahamic religions and, second, in the friendship and care we have for each other. We know, by learning from each other and paying attention to the climate of our nation and world, the right questions to ask and the ways to show each other support.

Reflecting on my first months as a Lubar Fellow, this safe space is what I am most thankful for in participating in the Institute. How comforting it is to walk into our group room, and know we can be wholly ourselves during our weekly hour of meeting. The students

in our group seek to support each other and to understand. There is only strength in this framework, because while it is presented with a soft heart, we welcome controversy. We do have long conversations about subjects such as the afterlife, and we still leave the room feeling at peace. Our Fellowship allows for critical thinking, but always with the return to consideration of safety and primary needs first. In these conversations, we often connect with each other, find each other laughing or even shocked, but we can end with greater appreciation and care for each other, which only increases our desire to protect the safe space the group represents.

There is no single moment that can describe my appreciation for this journey of interfaith dialogue I am on. Every time we meet, I am glad I am entering a place of care, and this is what stands out to me most about the Fellows group. When the world is in upheaval, when some Lubar Fellows might be fearful to go to class, we all meet and know that we support each other. I am excited to continue this experience throughout the rest of the year. As I spend time listening to the truthful experiences of other Fellows, I know more and more how to create safety for my classmates on campus outside of the Lubar Institute. I am able to hear the needs of the Fellows, and assess how other students potentially are feeling on campus.

I think that the mission of the Lubar dialogue is to provide an example for our world. In this sense, learning how to support and create safety is such a valuable tool for us to share out to the greater community. Safety is not a rad-

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ical concept, but, in the world we are living in, it may be that what students need most is to see that true pluralistic peace is possible. When comfort and se-

curity seems out of reach in our other learning environments, I am so glad to count on the Lubar group to keep providing the foundation for learning.

SECOND REFLECTION

I have been sitting with the weight of the anti-Semitic bias incident that occurred on the University of Wisconsin–Madison campus in Housing facilities for about a month now, and I am still lacking resolution. I have more questions now about the type of incident this was, and how it was handled, how students belonging to the Abrahamic religions responded to the incident, and how as a community we all move on. I do not think I will find answers.

On February 17, I went on Facebook and saw a post from a student with an image of a door in her residence hall that was covered in swastikas and Hitler's face. Her post began with, "Where's the speaking up? Where's the protest? How come nobody found out? I'm disappointed." She continued by explaining that the door belonged to the room of a Jewish student. She spoke of how another resident had done this to the student's door, and how she felt there was little to no action taken by the University to condemn this hatefulness. The student's Facebook post circulated widely throughout the UW–Madison community, even reaching local news outlets. On February 18, Dean of Students Lori Berquam responded to the event in a campus-wide email, insisting that hate is not tolerated on our campus, explaining how to report a bias incident or hate crime, and assuring that this

situation had been addressed through Housing and the Dean of Students Office within 24 hours of its occurrence.

Still, outrage ensued on campus. Despite our Dean of Students telling us that the incident had been addressed, and that the students' safety concerns had been addressed, it was apparent that the incident's perpetrator was still living in the residence hall. To many students, this was an injustice; indeed, many thought that the student should have been suspended or expelled. It quickly became apparent to members of the UW–Madison community that all students involved were in conversation, but that there seemed to be a strong amount of what can be called "grace" given to the perpetrating student. While it should be noted that the student victim of the crime acknowledged publicly that he saw it as a joke gone wrong, many students on campus did not see this as a reason to excuse the behavior. The student targeted for his religion does not necessarily speak for the whole religious population.

A town hall meeting was held, and students had the opportunity to again listen to the Dean of Students outline the events, and proclaim that hate is not tolerated here, on our campus. We also listened to members of the Jewish religious community, and leaders in diversity on campus.

Students were able to raise their hands and ask questions, and express their needs. The situation wrapped up in about a week following.

However, I still feel a general discontent in the air, even though the dust settled around this incident. No one is quite satisfied. During these events, I was outraged, and unsurprised. As someone who has spent time watching the University address issues of sexual assault on campus, and has heard about the intolerance for this crime but seen only one expulsion of a rapist on campus in University of Wisconsin–Madison history ever, I know that the system works to protect reputation and money.

What would our campus look like if the Dean of Students' Office really did not tolerate hateful behavior? How small would our campus shrink? What if there was not such a large risk of the University being sued for expelling a student? What if we put the general need and safety of entire populations above the needs of some sort of system education bureaucracy?

To many students, this anti-Semitic incident does not represent a larger picture. To some students, this was the first time they saw hate targeted at them on their campus. But, let me say, the track record on this campus is not strong. Could we list every incident of racism or gender-based violence on campus, and look at the true nothing that's been done? How many times will we hear the Dean of Students' Office state that they cannot believe something like this could happen here, that we "need to start the conversation around issues of..." and that we will not tolerate this behavior? I do not think we should settle for this

mentality. The conversation is here, and we can see that there is tolerance, and we are all losing our ability to believe in a community that honors diversity and respect. I am angry, and I am trying to find my place as a Christian student watching this anti-Semitic incident and the handful of other crimes that have occurred within the last month following the incident (such as the mocking of Native chants during a ceremony on campus, or the image drawn of a person of color hanging from a tree with the N-word underneath). The four open Title IX investigations against the University prove that the Office of Civil Rights has seen enough evidence that the University mishandled cases of sexual assault within the last year on campus. I am wondering where we have lost our strength and passively accepted lack of action as justice. I wonder if students of color and, in this particular case, Jewish students are being strong by trusting that learning from these incidents is best.

I see an interesting relationship in the idea of grace and forgiveness in this anti-Semitic case. Many Jewish students that I spoke with justified the situation, stating that yes, it was a prank gone horribly wrong, and that they hoped the student would learn. I am left wondering why those students are being so patient. Do they feel that they have to be, that they must remain quiet lest they themselves be seen as having somehow "caused" the incident, or are they simply right and kind, hoping for the best? How does this acceptance promote continuation of hate crimes, and how does it teach us all greater

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willingness to work with others, at the same time?

As a student in the Lubar Interfaith group, I believe in the power of effective conversation, the opportunity every person should have to be educated and to learn, and the need to accept differences as beautiful. Still, I wonder why we let students who do not see diversity as necessary and do not recognize and honor history and oppressed people thrive and get an education on our campus. I want these students to know better by now, and I think for the greater campus community, it is definitely worth students considering demanding more extreme measures in these cases. Should it be the responsibility of these

targeted students to forgive and to educate? Hate would not cease to exist even if every person committing these crimes was expelled, but how do we honor and preserve safe spaces? How do we learn to accept safety as a fundamental human right?

I have not yet resolved on the right course, but I see great power in the Abrahamic community to help correct this situation. Others may think differently, but I want to see the same passion for promoting effective pluralism through religious conversation that the Lubar Fellows exhibit executed across campus to deal with other kinds of cases as well. I want to take note and stay vigilant. We cannot forget. ●

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Josh Epstein

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Back in September, when the Fellows got together for the first time, we received the syllabus for the semester. There were plenty of interesting topics on tap, but one in particular drew my curiosity, not necessarily because I was looking forward to it but because I was puzzled. For three weeks in November we were to go have interfaith dialogue through art. I have never been much of a fan of art, and I struggled to see how we could have a productive dialogue using art, of all things. In a way, I was disappointed. Despite my confusion and slight disappointment, I decided, as with many things in my life, to keep an open mind and enjoy the rest of the semester.

Through the first two months of the semester, I noticed that each meeting had its own benefits and high points that were enjoyable. It also became apparent that the group as a whole was growing closer each week, making discussion more productive and comfortable. I think my favorite meeting prior to our time in the Wheelhouse Studios was our discussion of Rose Thering and *Nostra Aetate*. Prior to that meeting, we had talked a lot about different ways to have interfaith dialogue and

how to be a leader in dialogue. I found that most of our conversations had gone off on tangents where we were all posing clarification questions to each other about our respective faiths. These conversations were vital to establishing a framework for the group to work from, but they left me wanting more.

The documentary on Rose Thering was fascinating to me. As people who engage in interfaith dialogue, we should strive to be like Thering, who

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"Harmony, after all, is controlled dissonance."

I loved that we decided to translate the quote into the three different languages that make up our faiths.

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actually applied her study of faiths and used it to make change. The resulting conversation was the first time that I was truly satisfied and felt as if we dug deeper past the text or topic we were discussing. It was after this meeting that I felt that the group had really started to come together as a team. In the following few weeks, we continued to have extremely productive conversations that were deep and clarifying discussions about faith and what it means to each of us.

At the beginning of November, we left the safe haven of the Humanities building for Wheelhouse Studios. I had personally never heard of Wheelhouse and was still thoroughly confused about why art was on our syllabus. I remember leaving my house before the first meeting at Wheelhouse feeling how it was going to be a waste of time. The first meeting at the studio was a sort of reflection on the semester to that point and a planning session for what exactly we were going to do at Wheelhouse.

Looking back, I am surprised how seemingly invested I was in the process of planning the project. The open-endedness of the project was very important because it gave us the freedom to do whatever we wanted. Because of that, I was very interested in the ideas the group came up with and was glad that we were leaning toward a group project that we would all do together rather than a more individualized approach. After the first meeting, I found myself, surprisingly, looking forward to the next week.

The second and third sessions at Wheelhouse were dedicated to executing the project. We decided that we

would paint a dove, and inside it would be symbols that represent all three religions. We separated into groups to choose the symbols that would represent each faith inside the dove. It was very interesting to observe what everyone, especially those from other faiths, elected to put on the canvas. There were several from the other faiths which I had never seen before, let alone understanding their meaning. The same was true of the symbols the Jews chose.

After breaking into our respective groups, we sprang into action. We worked incredibly well as a team, and I loved how everyone seemed to fall directly into a role that suited them. I was especially encouraged because everyone seemed invested in our project. In addition, unlike most group projects, there was no leader or leaders, and there were certainly no slackers. Rather, we all assumed what I would consider to be essentially equal roles, doing all sorts of different things. One thing I noticed is that everyone was having a really good time, myself included. I left the second meeting really excited about the direction that we were going in and quite honestly, I wanted more time to work on the project.

The third meeting was when everything really came together. By then, we were working very well together as a group and we were all invested in the idea we had come up with. I think my favorite part of the project is the quote that we found from the book we read earlier in the semester: "Harmony, after all, is controlled dissonance." I loved that we decided to translate the quote into the three different languages that make up our faiths. The addition

of the main faith symbol from each of the three religions in the center of the dove really made it come together. At the time when the idea came up, I had not really painted anything. Instead, I chose to help with creating colors and supporting those who were painting. However, the group really encouraged me to paint the Star of David that was to be placed in the center of the dove. I was extremely hesitant at first because I knew that one of the other Jewish Fellows could undoubtedly paint a more attractive star than I could, but they insisted that I do it. I remember feeling legitimately nervous, and, afterward, I felt a bit disappointed and maybe embarrassed by my effort, but everyone told me what a good job I had done. Even if they didn't mean what they said, it felt good to be recognized, and I was proud of myself for taking a step outside my comfort zone. After thinking about it more, there really was no reason for me to be nervous about it or upset. In a way, as Jay, the director of Wheelhouse, said, it may not even matter how

the project turned out artistically, but it was the process of getting to where we arrived that will truly resonate.

I completely understand why I thought what I thought about this project at the beginning of the semester, but I cannot explain how happy and thankful I am that I decided to go in with an open mind and really give it a chance. This project was positioned perfectly in the semester, because it would not have been possible if the Fellows hadn't already been connected to one another. To say that I am surprised at how much fun I had creating this project with the Fellows would be an understatement. I think this project was really important for the Fellows because it brought us so much closer together. For me personally, it was an opportunity to grow and step outside my comfort zone, which I really appreciated. Our time in Wheelhouse Studios brought the Fellows so much closer together, and I am confident that these experiences will be the basis for some incredible conversations in the semester to come.

SECOND REFLECTION

For the second consecutive year, I anxiously awaited the second weekend of March for the Lubar Institute's annual weekend of worship or, as I call it, Faith Hop. Last year, I partook in all three services and the corresponding discussion as a member of the Undergraduate Forum. It was an eye-opening experience, but the primary thing it lacked for me was camaraderie. I knew several people in the Forum last year but none of them overly well. This

year I was especially excited for Faith Hop because of the great relationships I have built not just with the Fellows but also several Forum members. To my surprise, this year was drastically different than last year, not as much in the services themselves but in the experience. Come Sunday afternoon, I walked away from the Lutheran Campus Center not just satisfied with the weekend, but hopeful as well.

Having been through the Faith Hop

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To me, "Faith Hop" is about opening up to new experiences and reaching outside that perceived comfort zone.

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once before, I was less nervous about going to the services that were not my own. Rather, I looked forward to these moments and to helping other students who were going through the motions for the first time. While it is incredibly important for students who are attending the service of their own faith to help others navigate the service, it is especially comforting to be going through these experiences with people who, just like yourself, are a bit lost and feeling the same slightly uncomfortable feelings that you have. This is the role I tried to play this year for those going through Faith Hop for the first time. In a way, this is what I lacked last year.

The way the weekend is set up makes it feel like those representing the Lubar interfaith student groups at each service are a united front. I loved the support we all gave each other, and I think it brought us all closer together. I can only speak for myself, but I had some very interesting conversations with individuals I had never really spent time talking to before the weekend. In addition, it seemed to me that the turnout this year for all three services and the reflective discussion were higher than last year, which is especially encouraging and made the overall experience more positive.

I would say the service I was most anxious for last year was Jumu'ah prayer at the mosque. That feeling was the same this year, but it felt a little different. For one, I knew what to expect in terms of the prayer itself. Before Faith Hop last year, I had never been to the mosque for prayer. A good Jewish friend of mine who had never been to the mosque accompanied us this year,

and I am really glad he did. I could tell he was slightly uncomfortable, but to me, if you don't feel uncomfortable doing something like this for the first time, you are really doing it wrong. Being nervous means that you are respecting the service, the other people in the room, and the process itself. To me, Faith Hop is about opening up to new experiences and reaching outside that perceived comfort zone. The thing that struck me once again about Jumu'ah is the community aspect to prayer. The act of standing with your neighbors in straight lines, shoulder to shoulder in worship, is powerful. It connects those standing next to each other.

Following the prayer, my friend and I stayed at the mosque for several minutes talking to those around us. I introduced him to several of my Muslim friends from the Lubar student groups and also from various Arabic classes over the years. These introductions turned into productive discussions about Islam in which my friend learned some things about the religion. I let them converse while I chatted with some other people, but I really appreciated these conversations. As important as Faith Hop is for those who are a part of the Lubar Institute in some capacity, I think the best part about it is inviting those from the outside to join us to learn about the three religions. Once again the mosque proved to be a powerful experience and overall this event has made me more comfortable with other Muslims and has really helped me to understand Islam in a way I could not fathom before.

The most powerful and exciting moment of the weekend came at Hil-

lel on Friday night. In the Jewish religion, food plays a major role in daily life. Therefore, I think that, to truly understand Shabbat, it is extremely important to participate both in services and dinner. They each serve a unique purpose in explaining Judaism to non-Jews. For dinner, I was seated at a table with other Fellows Eva, Ahmed, and Kyra as well as three Israeli members of the Hillel staff: Shirly and Daniel (our Israel Fellows) and Shlomo, who is Orthodox and in charge of a lot of religious learning at Hillel.

I was slightly nervous when each sat down specifically to talk with Ahmed, who, of course, is a Muslim and from Syria. However as the night went on, I was astounded at the conversation that ensued. The four discussed their own cultures and genuinely showed interest in the others' stories. This conversation went on for several hours until the six or so of us were the last ones in the building. Ahmed and the Israelis spoke about being foreigners in America, the conflict in Syria, commonalities between their cultures, and even about the Arab-Israeli conflict.

The entire conversation was extremely productive and positive. I tried to participate in the conversation but with the exception of a few comments here and there, I was unable to because of my shock about just how well this discussion was going. When we finally decided to go home at about 9:30 PM, long after everyone else had left, I couldn't help but smile and be extremely happy and hopeful. Conversations like that one are exactly why I think the Lubar Fellows program is so important,

and why I decided to take Arabic in the first place.

After a day off, we all gathered once more at Luther Memorial Church on Sunday morning, and I was impressed with the turnout. The service itself was meaningful and I was especially intrigued by the pastor's sermon. He talked about how he was uncomfortable with a particular biblical passage. I found that I could relate to him. There are certainly parts of my religion and sacred texts that I am uncomfortable with. I appreciate the fact that as a pastor, a leader of a Christian community, he would admit his hesitance and uneasiness about speaking about a specific piece of text. The conversation that followed was valuable and a perfect conclusion to an extremely meaningful weekend.

As I have gone through the year as a Lubar Fellow, I have made it my goal to find the similarities between the three Abrahamic religions. Faith Hop, as it did last year, reaffirmed my belief that we are so much more similar than we are different. Our services have their distinctions, but as we pointed out in the reflective discussion, there are tons of similarities. The aspect of community is something that consistently returns to my mind when I think of these commonalities. In each faith service, I could see how the building we were in was a center for that community. Each of these communities was extremely warm and welcoming to us. It was because of conversations with members of these communities that I walked away especially satisfied this year. The relations I witnessed this weekend between Muslims and Jews especially hits home

Conversations like that one are exactly why I think the Lubar Fellows program is so important and why I decided to take Arabic in the first place.

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The program ended up being a great success. Honestly, it ended up being a lot better than I could have imagined.

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for me. I like to think that if Jews and Muslims around the world could sit down at the same table over dinner and have the kind of conversations that I experienced during Faith Hop the situation there could be so much better. If

it can happen in Madison, Wisconsin, it can happen anywhere. As I walked away from Hillel on Friday night, I couldn't help but smile all the way home. Experiences like Faith Hop give me hope for the world.

THIRD REFLECTION

The Lubar Institute above all else is about education. The Fellowship program, I would argue, is also about education but on a different level. As undergraduate college students, we come to Madison to be educated on various topics. As Lubar Fellows, we take it a step further: we are not only receiving an education from the other Fellows but also teaching each other and, probably most importantly, teaching ourselves. When Ulrich approached us early in the semester about the opportunity to lead a program with sixth graders, it seemed like a natural fit for us. I'll admit, I was skeptical and had another classic internal eye roll moment (the same one I had with the art project when it was proposed during the fall). After some time however, I warmed up to the idea, and the program ended up being a great success. Honestly, it ended up being a lot better than I could have imagined.

When Ulrich proposed an education program to us involving educating sixth graders, I wasn't overly happy. As I said, it was a very similar reaction to my initial thoughts about the art project at the beginning of the year. The idea was put on the back burner for a while but was brought up again in, I think, February. After we committed to doing the event, the emails started coming from Kristen

Scott, the teacher of the sixth-grade class. This was the height of my frustration with this project. She was making suggestions that simply did not fall into line with what I believed our mission to be. I began to question her motives and why we were even doing this project. I was relieved to find out that several of the other fellows also disagreed and felt uncomfortable with these suggestions. As we progressed further, we finally got the chance to meet Kristen and that is when my opinion of the project truly shifted.

Kristen was supposed to meet with us for a meeting in March, but she had to cancel, and I think a lot of us were really disappointed and frustrated. The next week, we invited her to join us again and this time she attended our meeting. It was at that meeting that my views about the project changed drastically. This ignorant and demanding woman whom I had imagined from the emails turned out to be one of the most incredible persons I have met. In high school we learned about levels of learning ranging from knowledge or memorization to evaluation. Most of what we learned, especially in high school, was either memorization or another low level of learning. One teacher I had in particular made us think and

learn at such a high level, and it made learning enjoyable and exciting. This was the impression I got from Kristen Scott when we met her. Immediately I became excited about the project and I was determined to make it a success.

From there, the design and agenda took off. Though we had some internal frustrations with coordinating the stations and other organizational issues, I think that meeting was the turning point in the project because we understood what we were dealing with and whom we were working for. Personally, I felt encouraged to be working for a person who demanded and inspired her students to learn on such a high level.

Leading up to the event itself, I think everyone was of the opinion that we needed more time to plan the stations and nail down the format for the event, but, nonetheless, we went forward. I was fortunate enough to attend both days, and I'm so glad I did. The students were very well-behaved and excited about learning, just as I thought they would be after hearing Kristen talk about them. I could tell that the education they were receiving was of a very high quality. They asked great questions and seemed to be genuinely interested in what we were saying. For once, it was nice to be completely on the teaching end of the educational process.

I feel that my year as a Lubar Fellow adequately prepared me to be able to teach these students about my faith and the good that religion as a whole can provide people who use it for the right reasons. Overall, our event with Cherokee Middle School was a success and a great learning experience for not only the students, but the Fellows as well.

For me, it was yet another experience that changed my outlook and forced me to try something out of my comfort zone.

Looking at the year as a whole, there are several moments that stick out to me as especially memorable. Of course, our two major projects this year, our conversation through art and the event with the sixth graders, were highlights. Although both of these events were beneficial and rewarding in their own unique ways, in coming years I would narrow the focus to one or the other. I took great lessons from each project but I would have loved more of an emphasis on conversation.

There are many topics we didn't get to this year that I would have loved to discuss with the fellows. It would have been nice to dig into certain topics, especially during the second semester, after we as a group had established a strong rapport. Our final conversation of the year, where we each spoke on what we love and dislike or disagree with about our respective faith, was possibly our best. I think I dug deeper during that conversation than any other this year, and I felt the other Fellows doing the same. We each have such a unique yet similar connection to our faiths. Some of us are more religious or observant than others but it is clear that religion plays a significant role in every one of our lives.

This experience has made a remarkably positive impact on my outlook on life and the way I look at people who are different from myself. In actuality, those different from me really are not all that different. Deep down, we have the same values and believe in essen-

I think I dug deeper during that conversation than any other this year, and I felt the other Fellows doing the same.

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tially the same things. We may go about these things in different ways, but the similarities run rampant.

I began this year seeking to learn that we, the people of the Abrahamic religions, are more similar than we are different. I wanted to learn more about what we have in common and dismiss our distinctions and what makes us different. I think especially with the rhetoric that is on full display right now, this was especially true. While those many similarities are important to recognize and have become very apparent to me, I think the more meaningful lesson I learned is that we are different and there is nothing wrong with that. There is beauty in difference as long as no judgments come with it. This is a

key idea that the vast majority of people seem to miss. They focus on differences as negatives, but that does not have to be and should not be the case.

When speaking about religion, it is vital to be able to consider both similarities and differences; otherwise, it is impossible to have a productive conversation. Being a Lubar Fellow provided me with valuable opportunities to learn from others and to teach others. More importantly, it gave me the opportunity to learn about myself and to teach myself some extremely valuable lessons I couldn't learn anywhere else. As I depart college and proceed into my professional life, I will take these lessons learned here and always remember the experiences I had this year. ●

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Kyra Fox

My interfaith journey started years ago, celebrating Yom Kippur with the Jewish side of my family just weeks after being baptized at a non-denominational Christian church with the Christian side of my family. Since then, I have attended a wide variety of religious ceremonies across the Abrahamic religions, celebrated countless different holidays, and been exposed to ideas that contradict, collaborate, or overlap. I have participated in interfaith dialogue with my church's youth group since before I can remember, constantly questioning what I know and have come to accept as truth. My spiritual journey has been one of constant change and development.

Needless to say, coming into the Lubar Fellowship, I was not sure what to expect. Would this setting simply reinforce the ideas I already had? Or would it expose me to concepts and ideas I hadn't even considered, even after a lifetime of interfaith reflection? Thus far, I have undoubtedly found the latter to be true. This Fellowship has already pushed me beyond what I thought I understood to a new level of religious dialogue.

Going into the first meeting of the Lubar Fellows, I was very nervous. My

religious identity isn't exactly conventional. I consider myself an Agnostic Unitarian Universalist who also identifies with her Christian and Jewish backgrounds. When we first went around the circle, introducing ourselves and naming our faiths, I wasn't sure what to say. I explained my faith as best as I could, but compared to the other answers of "Christian," "Muslim," and "Jewish," my answer was complicated and confusing.

My biggest fear was that all of the other Lubar Fellows would hold set

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When I find myself in disagreement with those who hold different religious values than myself, I have learned how to redirect the conversation to focus on what we have in common instead of the small differences that divide us.

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beliefs, and that my personal questioning would be a strange addition to the group. However, after getting to know the Fellows, I have found that to be far from the truth.

Although there are stark differences in the faiths and spiritual identities of each Fellow, I have found that our group is united in our desire to learn more about our faiths and the faiths of the rest of the group. We are constantly questioning what we have been taught, whether it was in a conventional religious setting, or conclusions that we have come to in our own spiritual journeys. Every idea is fair game to be questioned in our meetings.

I have found our questioning to be extremely productive. Whether it was considering the experiences of Bruce Feiler that he wrote about in *Abraham: A Journey to the Heart of Three Faiths*, or investigating the religious undertones of current news stories, our collaborative effort to seek out new knowledge and perspectives has been very rewarding. No matter how diverse a background we each come from, we can all benefit from the unique perspectives that others bring to the table.

Throughout my Lubar experience, the idea of finding harmony in dissonance has really resonated with me. As I have personally struggled to reconcile the differences between my different faith backgrounds, I have found this idea to be comforting. There is much dissonance between the three Abrahamic religions; however, their core values are the same. As we read in the book *Abraham*, all three religions find value in the actions of Abraham as he proves his devotion to God. All three

religions stem from the same ideas and values; their differences are due to circumstance and interpretation. When I struggle to identify with a certain aspect of a religion, I am comforted to know that my personal values are upheld in each of the Abrahamic religions. In the same way, when I find myself in disagreement with those who hold different religious values than myself, I have learned how to redirect the conversation to focus on what we have in common instead of the small differences that divide us.

Another interesting aspect of the Lubar Fellowship has been to learn about the different ways my own faiths are practiced. I consider myself a very spiritual person; however, my family is very loose with regards to religious practices, rules, and traditions. It has been fascinating to interact with Fellows whose religions make up a huge portion of their lives. I learned so much about different customs of my own religions that I had never even heard of.

So far, my favorite part of the Lubar Fellowship has been relating interfaith dialogue to current events. Our discussion of the Pope's visit to the United States was intriguing and thought-provoking. Never before had I considered how Americans would react if a prominent Muslim leader had paid a visit to our country's capitol. This is just another example of how the variety of perspectives and backgrounds of the Fellows adds a valuable dimension to our conversation. I have no background in Islam, and the Muslim population in the town where I grew up was very small. Having the chance to hear the perspectives of Muslim students on

current events has been an invaluable learning experience for me.

In our dialogue, the idea of how to become an interfaith leader has been brought up several times. Prior to my experience with this Fellowship, I had never considered how I could act as an interfaith leader. Interfaith dialogue was something I enjoyed, but I didn't realize the importance of having these conversations with other people as a way to promote peace and unity.

Since then, I have come to believe that interfaith dialogue is vital in a society that is filled with ignorance and preconceived notions. With the recent acts of terrorism that have been on the front page of the news, as well as the constant, rarely discussed violence and unrest across the world due to religious differences, it is more important than ever to promote understanding of different religions. I have come to realize

that being an interfaith leader can be as simple as opening the floor for people to share ideas.

In response to the recent terrorist attacks, a few members of the Fellowship and Forum along with other students on campus organized a vigil in honor of the victims, followed by a roundtable discussion. Although we set up the event, it was the participation of the students who attended that made the event successful. Simply by opening the floor for them to share their thoughts, we promoted a safe space of interfaith dialogue where people could ask questions and learn.

Moving forward with the Fellowship, I hope to continue to foster safe spaces for dialogue that promotes growth and understanding rather than divisiveness. I hope that, through this Fellowship, we can promote harmony, rather than discord.

SECOND REFLECTION

When I applied for the Lubar Interfaith Student Fellowship, I marked both Christian and Jewish as my faiths. Raised in an interfaith household, I was exposed to both traditions. Not being particularly religious myself, I never felt attached to one or the other, and when asked about my religion, I always responded with both. This response often elicited some confusion. How could I be a part of two religions at the same time? Judaism and Christianity are fundamentally different; doesn't that make them fundamentally incompatible? After awhile, I just avoided answering the question of my faith. It was far easier

than explaining the complexity of my faith background.

However, as I grew older and learned more about my faiths, I became more and more disillusioned. I noticed my own progressive beliefs conflicting with the doctrines of both of my faiths, and I began to question whether religion was something I even wanted to be a part of. Although religious history and culture continued to fascinate me, I distanced myself from the intimate, personal side of religion.

So, when offered the opportunity to travel to Israel for my Jewish Birthright trip, I initially turned down the offer. I

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Through travel, participation in programs like the Lubar Fellowship, and constant questioning and dialogue, I will strive to make sense of that which is far bigger than me.

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was afraid I would be surrounded by extremely religious, close-minded people, and that my constant questioning would stick out like a sore thumb. Eventually, I was convinced to go on Birth-right not for the religious experience, but instead for the travel experience. A free 10-day trip to Israel? An offer like that could not be turned down.

Upon first meeting my fellow Birth-right travelers, I was shocked at the wide range of religious devoutness in our group. I ended up being one of the most religious people in my group, which ranged from atheist to Orthodox Jew. Instead of being the one always asking questions, I was constantly explaining different Jewish traditions and ideas to other group members. This brought me a sense of pride, but also doubt. Did I really have the authority to explain Judaism when I wasn't even sure of my own beliefs?

At the beginning of the trip, I was simply overwhelmed by just being in Israel, a place with so much history and symbolic power. The sights left me dazed; the people left me speechless. I was in constant awe at how intertwined Judaism was with every aspect of life in Israel. I thought I had understood the meaning of a Jewish state, but I completely underestimated its power and potency.

As the trip continued and we experienced more Jewish history, I began to react in ways I hadn't expected. I had thought that the Western Wall wouldn't have the same effect on me as it did on those who were more religious. However, upon visiting the Wall in Jerusalem, I was completely overcome. We continued to visit sites of Jewish histo-

ry, and each time, I felt more and more connected to my tradition. In Zefat, the ancient city of Jewish mysticism, I even got Bat Mitzvahed, the mark of entry into Jewish adulthood.

Throughout the entire trip, I questioned why all of our experiences had had such a profound effect on me. The irony was stark. I wasn't religious, and I fundamentally disagreed with many Jewish ideas and traditions. However, in the Holy Land, I felt more connected to my Jewish roots than ever before.

Maybe it was simply being on the land that my ancestors fought over for so many years. Maybe it was the proximity to such a great number of people who share my faith. Maybe it was my trip's subtle propaganda supporting Judaism and the State of Israel. Whatever it was that made me feel more connected to my Jewish heritage, I will never know. I do know this: returning home from my trip to Israel, I feel more a part of my faith than ever.

Now that I am home, I face the question of what to do with this new sense of my Jewish faith. How can I use my faith for good? How can I reconcile my own beliefs with what Judaism teaches? How can I maintain my faith while still questioning Judaism, both ideologically and politically? And the biggest question of all: how does my Jewish faith fit in with my Christian roots?

I don't know the answers, or how to even begin searching for them. But I do know this: I must continue to explore my faiths. Through travel, participation in programs like the Lubar Fellowship, and constant questioning and dialogue, I will strive to make sense of that which is far bigger than me.

THIRD REFLECTION

I grew up surrounded by interfaith dialogue. Throughout my life, my parents had spurred conversations of religion in politics, differences and similarities in world religions, and how we can strive for peace and acceptance. I was raised Unitarian Universalist, a faith that welcomes people of all faith backgrounds as long as they can unite under the seven UU principles.

The first of these principles is “the inherent worth and dignity of all people.” More than all of the other UU principles, this first principle has guided my life in a profound and irreversible way. Although I have my own set of beliefs, whenever I encounter someone with different beliefs, I strive to see the inherent worth and dignity in these beliefs. I try to place myself in their position, to understand the history and context that underlies these different beliefs. This has not been easy, but somehow, I was always able to find parallels and shared values, allowing me to empathize with those whose beliefs differed from my own.

However, as I grew older, I began to encounter beliefs so vastly different and fundamentally contradictory to my own that I began to question this idea of “the inherent worth and dignity of all people.” How could I possibly see the worth in beliefs that preached hate and violence? In the past, I had always been able to find an empathy through which to accept different beliefs. But as my eyes opened and I began to see the hateful effects that some beliefs had on humanity, I doubted my own faith, which

rested on the idea that all people and all beliefs had worth and dignity.

It was with this mindset that I entered the Lubar Fellowship. I applied on a whim, intrigued by the idea of interfaith dialogue and hoping to work through my struggles with my own faith in the process. In all honesty, I had no idea what to expect.

After the first meeting, however, I had serious doubts about the Lubar Fellowship and my place within it. I had come to Lubar in the hopes of questioning my personal faith and values. Unlike me, the people surrounding me seemed deeply ingrained in their own faiths. I doubted whether I could question my own beliefs surrounded by people who seemed so comfortable with their own.

As a result, my walls went up, and for the first month or two of Lubar, it was difficult for me to engage with the program. I was too afraid to openly question, so instead I just went along with the discussion and kept my thoughts to myself. I didn’t allow myself to open my eyes to the incredible things that were happening around me.

But as the Fellowship progressed, I started to notice that my peers weren’t just going with the flow of the conversation. Rather, they were actively questioning, even doubting, their own deeply held beliefs. Not only that, but they were also reaching out to me, wanting to hear more about my own background and faith. This was an unfamiliar experience. Never before had I been able to educate others through my own faith experience.

The greatest gift I have gained from

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being a Lubar Fellow is simply these connections that I have made. I went into the Fellowship expecting to get to know people of different backgrounds. I never expected to create bonds that were strong because of our differences, not in spite of them.

Before entering the fellowship, I considered myself an open-minded person. I respected other beliefs. I tried to see their inherent worth and dignity. Yet try as I might, I was still being held back by biases that have been deeply engrained within me since birth. Although I accepted other religions, I still had preconceived notions about them that prevented me from embracing them.

I can't say that all of that has changed. I still fight battles with my

preconceived notions every day. I still work to swallow different aspects of all religions that contradict my own beliefs.

What I have found, however, is a support system with which I can fight these battles. The Lubar Fellowship has taught me that no one knows it all, and that we all struggle with different aspects of our own religions. However, behind the rules and traditions are fundamental values we all share. It is these values that have created such a strong bond between the Lubar Fellows. It is these bonds that remind me that underneath the ghastly media portrayals and stereotypes about different religions, every person does have inherent worth and dignity. It is our job as interfaith leaders to bring that worth and dignity out into the open. ●

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In the pursuit of knowledge and understanding, I managed to stumble upon the Lubar Interfaith Student Fellows program, an opportunity that I imagined would allow me to learn the value of religion and the inherent differences between the three Abrahamic religions. This initial thought, however, was deeply misguided. The Fellowship, which I hoped to teach me about other religions, didn't do so in the manner I had expected. Rather, it guided me to make my own conclusions. Within the initial few sessions, my understanding of Abrahamic religions, guided by other Fellows, began to change. But, more so, my understanding of my own religion and the very essence of religion began to change.

Perhaps the most invigorating concept was the realization that no one set of interpretations or thoughts within religion is the same, reminding me that "you can never step into the same book twice, because you are different each time you read it" (John Barton). Through discussion, primarily from hearing each group of Fellows agree and disagree on various topics, I began to understand that, no matter what religion you follow or who you are, refer-

ring to various religious books offers little to no real truth or understanding. While the claim is bold, I believe that one can study and understand what each Abrahamic text explicitly says, but that, ultimately, until that knowledge is merged with each individual's experiences, interactions, and perceptions, the words remain abstract.

The inspiration for this thought occurred from the discussion on "The Core of Our Traditions." Within the

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differing groups, there was often disagreement—not about any particular text or concept in themselves, but rather on how these texts and concepts fit into each tradition’s understanding of religion. This realization opened me up to the idea that, while those in each respective Abrahamic tradition read and study the same text, we each practice and understand the religion in different ways.

Within my personal understanding, one that has not been enrolled in any formal religion schooling or excessive parental pressure, I see beauty in the concepts and the inner roots of the issues portrayed by the Qur’an. Within my understanding of Islam, the beauty is within the simple. It lies in the inner core of the concepts and lessons of the Qur’an, and what each passage hopes to address.

One almost comical way I have always understood my religion is by looking at a gummy bear. The gummy bear, a sin. Actually eating the gummy bear, which contains the pork by-product gelatin, is not the issue. Rather, it is the portion of Islam’s message to promote life, prosperity, and good health. In history, pigs have been considered relatively unclean and plague-ridden creatures.

While I believe that most people recognize that the understanding and experience of religion differs between individuals, I felt that it was the Lubar Fellows who helped me reaffirm this insight and to really understand to what degree religions and peoples can’t and shouldn’t be grouped.

One of the defining moments of Lubar this semester was the conver-

sation regarding the Abrahamic traditions and their perceptions on afterlife. The discussion focused on how in Judaism afterlife is not necessarily existent. The concept, something that is very different than that of the Christian and Muslim traditions, pushed me to question what implications that could have. I tried to image how, within my own life, I would act or behave differently or have different intentions if Islam did not mention an afterlife. The question kept shifting between whether in the present day I would strive for greatness and hold a greater drive within life to create understanding, or if it would act as a hindrance that could create a lack of regard for others and their interests. This understanding, however, might also produce no change or might not impact the majority of individuals and their character. It was an interesting inquiry into the implications of minute differences between Abrahamic traditions and what they could mean.

Overall, being a Lubar Fellow has been an eye-opening experience that has allowed myself and others to expand our knowledge and understanding of our own and other Abrahamic traditions. Although at times, “Calculus: Differential Equations” has created difficulty for my being able to maximize my personal Lubar Fellows participation, it has been both a pleasure and an opportunity to participate in such invigorating discussion with student leaders of the fellow Abrahamic religions. I hope to continue the discussions next semester and in future years.

SECOND REFLECTION

Religion. Religion has been dubbed as one of the taboo topics in public discourse. As the saying goes, “Common etiquette says not to talk about politics, sex, religion, or money.” The idea presented in this quote is very bold, asserting that these subjects should not be brought up. Perhaps this is where we go wrong because everything I’ve heard tells us not to talk about religion, that such conversations cannot go well. Until you do it. This reflection forced me to think about the reality of religion: it is perhaps the greatest unifying factor among people, but also the greatest divider. The ongoing discourse in the United States’ political system and worldwide has brought into the question the meaning and understanding of coexistence and how individuals can come together and find common ground.

This notion is one that the Lubar Interfaith Student Fellows program has challenged. It has provided me with a deeper understanding of religion, social interaction, and worship today. The Lubar Fellows organized a group of 12 random individuals who adhered broadly to one of the three Abrahamic faiths. After this, perhaps an anomaly to someone who adamantly believes that coexistence is not comfortable, coexistence occurred. The group naturally agreed that there would be no dispute on the legitimacy of another’s ideas or challenging of religion with intention beyond learning.

In reflection, the opportunity allowed adherents of each respective religion to reflect on the other’s tradi-

tions, allowing each of us to understand something about each other’s religion or to find intersections that we had not previously understood. The greatest differences actually occurred among members of each religious group, especially in terms of how they had been brought up to understand different ideas. An example of this was about how each tradition perceives holidays. Several students had various interpretations of their own traditions’ holidays, explaining why they see some as more or less religious or celebratory. This reality makes one wonder where this inherent fear about learning about other traditions and how they differ comes from.

The dialogue of the Fellows helped me better understand the need for spaces in civil society and conversations about topics such as religion where a moral and civil standard is held to better understand one another. The discussions of religion rarely escalated, since the conversations took place in a context that allowed each person to present their understanding of their own religion without feeling defensive. Space for this kind of conversation is rarely organized on campus or elsewhere, and efforts to do so are frequently put down because of fears that one’s own beliefs might be challenged. However, being a Lubar Fellow has helped us overcome that difficulty by creating a network and avenue to understand one another better. It also created a friendship and camaraderie that allows us to know each other on a personal level and maintain a level of respect and commu-

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The structure of the Lubar Interfaith Student Fellows allowed the group to come together and get to know one another as individuals and remove many of the abstractions that would have existed otherwise.

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nity open to hearing all thoughts. This is perhaps what is missing in collective dialogue, where the conversation on religion is an abstraction that blurs the human interaction and reasonableness of individuals and rather projects the religion on the face of a criminal or notable villain. This regional perspective must shift to one that understands and

values religion and some adherence to a being as a natural part of the world system. This perspective motivates us to understand better and learn through underappreciated institutions such as the Lubar Center for the Study of the Abrahamic Religions and to hold other “bigger than us” conversations elsewhere in civil society.

THIRD REFLECTION

The power and ability of faith to unite people has been perhaps the most positive and devastating phenomenon of history. The reach and power of religion has resulted in the most beautiful parts of human history and many of the most tragic. It is in the Lubar Fellows’ experience that one truly begins to understand how and why this occurs. The typical image of having three Jews, three Christians, and four Muslims in a room speaking about religion and their intersectionalities is one of sheer chaos. However, what happened among the Fellows was exactly the opposite. The Lubar Fellows’ experience showed that religion is very much “to each his own,” since the internalization of religion is nothing but personal. The interaction and safe setting for discussion of religion and life with those of different faiths is paramount to coexisting, something I attribute not to our understanding religion but to understanding each other. The structure of the Lubar Interfaith Student Fellows allowed the group to come together and get to know one another as individuals and remove many of the abstractions that would have existed otherwise.

These abstractions and “walls” are to what I attribute much of the hate that fuels misunderstanding and animosity between religions. The lack of knowledge and friendship that religions have for one another tend to amplify and distort these abstractions, thus dehumanizing members of other traditions. It is structures such as the Lubar Institute that decimate these walls and make one realize that to dislike someone on the premise of religion is baseless. This became apparent through the many interactions with the group.

The clearest example was in the idea of legitimization of religion, as the Jewish students who came from interfaith parents spoke about how in some interpretations they would not be considered Jewish or a “real” Jew, as if this was measurable. The concept proved difficult to me, as one could perceive an individual practicing Orthodox Judaism, or, in the case of Islam, Wahhabism to not be a “real” Muslim or Jew. This assumption could be made given the idea that religion in itself is fluid, and thus that to practice these faiths on the basis of historical and arguably outdated concepts makes the practi-

tioners' faith illegitimate. The exploration of this concept is sometimes debated among those who accuse others of not being religious enough, but, personally, I think it is a fruitless debate. The Lubar Fellows' experience and the exploration of my own religion of Islam and the phrase I so dearly respect—"To you be your religion, and to me my religion;" Holy Qur'an, chapter 109, verse 6—has provided me with a better understanding that each faith presents the same text or a similar idea. However, internalization is dependent on each individual experience and how it applies to one's own life.

The example that comes to mind is the tolerance and embracing of the different Abrahamic religions and how depending on geographic location the idea takes a different vigor. As an individual from Jerusalem and Hebron, I acknowledge the power and beauty of religion. Touring the Church of Nativity and the location of the birth of prophet Issa (pbuh)—Jesus—I realize that, while this character does not hold the same status in my tradition as he does in Christianity, that fact does not stop my appreciation toward those who travel from all over the world to fulfill their religious obligations. There is obvious beauty in this, and I believe that, when people are in a setting of inter-faith worship and understanding, there is a different internalization of other religions.

However, as I pass the Western Wall and Al Aqsa Mosque and think about the animosity in the country, it becomes clear that there is passion involved, but the passion stems essentially from wanting the same thing for

each respective religion. The passion, obscured from the geopolitical reality of the country and the very unreligious friction, divides people and takes away from embracing one another and their religions. While the geographic location remains limited, differing religions are embraced in each location, and people have a different understandings of religion depending on their individual experiences.

Beyond this, perhaps one of the most influential moments as a Lubar Fellow came in the final session on the discussion of "If you could change one thing about your faith, what would it be?" The question is bold, yes, but also one that makes one think. As many of my peers listed off their grievances and thoughts, they began to realize that it is not religion that corrupts, it is people and what religion is used to justify. Their spoken thoughts often began with a very real frustration, but ended with a realization that it wasn't really about the religion, it was about other people and their interpretations of the religion and/or philosophy on how people should adhere.

One of the other expressed grievances was a detestation towards those who feel the need to judge when something is done that is not consistent with their religion. This attitude was focused on those who committed acts against a religion's clearly defined precepts. Later in the conversation, another Fellow said that, while it is clear that we should not judge and/or treat anyone else differently—since none of us is a greater being than anyone else—we can acknowledge that people do com-

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mit terrible acts, which do deserve to be detested.

The dialogue forced me to reflect upon the natural and perhaps imperfect impulse to judge and think more or less about another person if they exceed or do not fulfill one's expectations. The interaction provided an alternative view of the world around and another way to look at many real-life interactions that occur in daily life.

The Lubar Fellows experience has been a genuine one. The leadership of Dr. Rosenhagen and the coordination of Prof. Cohen has allowed for an experience that goes far beyond the classroom. Being a Fellow offered a different perspective on religion and how it is truly fluid depending on the person and religion. The Fellowship has offered many opportunities to speak about re-

ligion and the intersectionalities between the three Abrahamic religions, and to learn to embrace both these similarities and differences. It was a pleasure and an opportunity to work with the visiting middle-school students and capture their excitement to learn about religion and the world around them. While meeting outside of the classroom is a chore, both my peers and I cannot thank Dr. Rosenhagen enough for his unparalleled commitment to the Lubar Interfaith Student Fellows program and continuing the essential conversation among adherents of differing religions. I hope that the Center for Religion and Global Citizenry continues to bridge the gap between traditions and continue the essential conversation on religion and faith. ●

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The ideas that are important to a religion can come in different forms. They can take a conceptual form, or they can take a physical, symbolic form. An example of a conceptual form would be the idea of compassion or mercy that is taught by many faiths. It is something you cannot directly see, feel, or hear. Conversely, a symbolic form would be something like the cross for the Christian faith. This is something that you can see and touch. The thing that has stood out to me the most from my Lubar Fellowship experience thus far is the prevalence and significance of these two forms in the three Abrahamic religions.

First, I noticed the conceptual ideas between and within faiths. We read “The Core of our Traditions,” a piece aiming to bring forth the fundamental teaching for each faith. For Christianity, the main concept was that of love, stemming from the Bible verse, “This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you” [John 15:12]. In Judaism, the main concept was proclaimed to be found in the *Shema*, “Listen, Israel, the Eternal is our God, the Eternal is One.” Lastly, for Islam, the main concept was said to be

seen in the phrase, “Bismillah ir-Rahman ir-Rahim,” or “In the name of God, boundlessly Compassionate and Merciful.” For all three faiths, the love of God seems to be a recurring motif. Of course, the religions have varying ideas on how the love of and for God manifests itself in an individual’s spirituality, but the centrality of one’s loving relationship with God was a pleasant observation for me.

Another common theme to be noted from these core concepts is that these ideas were just that: ideas. At

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bottom, the three faiths each value an intangible, invisible spiritual notion. The principal constructs of Christianity, Judaism, and Islam are not something you can physically make sense of, as they rely on feelings, thoughts, and spiritual connections.

After this, we moved on to art-based dialogue, where I noticed that religions also have physical, symbolic concepts as well. In other words, Christianity, Judaism, and Islam also have ideas that you *can* observe with one or more of your five senses. Using art to nurture interfaith dialogue involved coming up with a project that could showcase the ties between faiths, while also respecting the individualities of the faiths. We had decided to execute this project by incorporating author Bruce Feiler's words, "Harmony, after all, is controlled dissonance." We drew a dove to represent peace, and we intended to fill the body of this bird with symbols of our religions. But this involved *finding* symbols that are representative to the faiths. Our painting began filling up with books, crosses, mosques, fruits, moons and stars. There were definitive as well as ambiguous symbols and messages. What I learned is that along with intellectual constructs, each religion also has visible, tangible constructs that play a huge role in spiritual development.

Personally, I found this project to be quite difficult. I think that this was because of the fact that in Islam, drawings of important figures are prohibited. Mosques do not have portraits of prophets. You usually can't even finding any object or animal drawings. It is for this reason that Arabic calligraphy

of the Qur'an's text and arabesque designs became important for the decorating of mosques. I thought of drawing these things onto the dove first, but this quickly proved to be insufficient for filling up the blank spaces on the large bird. Next, I thought of obvious symbols, like the Kaaba or a mosque, but again, this simply wasn't enough to fill up the blankness.

I realized that I was having trouble linking my religious experience with anything that I could represent in picture form. My religion has always taught me through spiritual paradigms. For me, the most significant things about my faith are mental ideas; things that you can represent through examples and indirect drawings, but not something with an exact symbol tied to it. For instance, one thing that my religion has taught me is the idea of physical and mental humility. There are many ways to draw examples of this, but there is no one drawing that is associated with it.

I had to figure out how to convert those unseen paradigms into something that I could draw with a paint brush. I had to think back to my childhood Sunday School days, when we were given coloring books to learn central concepts. I tried remembering what the pictures were and how they represented these concepts. Digging down deep to identify symbols that are important in my faith and to my own personal spirituality required me to step outside of my comfort zone. I was simply never taught to tie physical objects to my faith.

The exercise was eye-opening. I never thought that I would need a sym-

bol to represent my faith, or to remind me about the important concepts of Islam, and I still do not. But what I did learn is that this can be an excellent medium for interfaith dialogue. Humans are often very visual. Seeing things solidifies them. People can read about and educate themselves on other faiths, but visual representations of concepts are a refreshing added component. Because I do not belong to a certain faith, I only know what I am taught in schools or from the media. Collecting a bunch of drawings representing what religion means to an individual can provide information that textbooks cannot—what the religion looks like on a person.

I saw the other Fellows drawing things on the dove that I did not know were a part of their specific faith, or that I did not know meant so much to their personal spiritual growth. There was so much life behind each drawing on the dove because it was chosen as an important part of someone's faith, and because it was personalized to further distinguish each individual's personal religious experience.

Furthermore, seeing all of the seemingly random drawings together, sharing the same space on a dove, really exemplified our chosen theme of

harmony. This showed that maybe it's not about tying the important parts of your faith to a physical representation. Rather, it's more about tying the physical representation down to the faith. It's about providing a window into your personal experience as a practitioner of that faith. The resulting masterpiece is visual evidence that shows how the Abrahamic religions can thrive together in more than just tolerance: how an arabesque design can sit comfortably next to a drawing of Jesus on the cross, and how the sight of one empowers and beautifies the other.

The project showed me that it's important to let go of the discomfort we may feel when opening up during religious dialogue. Making yourself uncomfortable is inherent to interfaith collaboration. Thinking about our religion in new ways can not only strengthen our own faith, but it can also open up doors to harmonize with other faiths. The intention of the dove is to harbor and nurture the importance of interfaith interaction, while guarding the uniqueness of each. No one symbol could fully represent my faith, not even all of them combined. However, the symbols are a foot in the right direction toward communication and harmony.

SECOND REFLECTION

I had an unapologetically average vacation this winter. I spent my time watching TV, visiting family and friends, and trying to partake in some early spring cleaning. I also managed to sign myself up for a last-minute wisdom tooth removal surgery. Having been

under the power of anesthesia, I don't remember much of what happened in the recovery room after the surgery. I do remember the nurse trying to wake me up. I recall a few of the questions she was asking me in order to bring me back to consciousness. One question in

Thinking about our religion in new ways can not only strengthen our own faith, but open up doors to harmonize with other faiths.

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particular stood out to me. This question, and my response, has forced me to contemplate the approach we often take to interfaith dialogue.

Although I cannot remember her exact words, I know that the nurse had asked me about my hijab, the head covering worn by many Muslim women. As I recall this moment, I feel a little bit of panic because I simply cannot get myself to remember how I responded. I have no problem with being asked about my faith; however, I always try to be careful with how I answer. Giving an answer that is sensitive and respectful as well as thoughtful and accurate is something that is very difficult to do when I am in my right mind. Here, not only was I half asleep, but I also had gauze in my numb mouth and could not speak properly. I don't remember my own answer, and it worries me to think about what I could have said. Thankfully, I do remember how the nurse responded to my answer: "Oh I see. You wear it so that the focus is on who you are as a person, and not your outer appearance."

Phew. I guess I should feel proud of myself for being able to provide an acceptable answer while barely conscious. Nonetheless, this exchange got me thinking about a crucial matter in interfaith dialogue: why do we get so nervous when trying to tell someone about our beliefs? It shouldn't be any different than telling someone why we like a certain food or explaining any matter of opinion. For some reason, when this opinion has to do with religion, we want the answer to be delivered in the most perfect manner.

When I was younger, being asked

about my religion made my heart beat faster and my hands shake a little. I would guess that this is because either I was afraid that the person would say something offensive to purposefully try to hurt me, or that I wouldn't know how to answer. If I had to further psychoanalyze myself, I'd go even deeper and say that it was because the question felt like I was being called out for my differences. Over the years, I have learned to own my beliefs with confidence and to feel enthusiasm, rather than fear, when asked about what I believe. Although I no longer feel fear, I still feel a little anxious that I will answer something incorrectly and misrepresent my religion. When asked about religion, people tend to become cautious, terrified of offending or misrepresenting. But why?

This question has been bugging me ever since. This nervousness forces interfaith dialogue to become scripted, formal, and rigid. The dialogue is no longer a conversation between two groups, but a presentation. I suppose religion has always been a sensitive topic for individuals. Everyone is always afraid to offend or be offended when it comes to talking about our faith.

In the Lubar Fellows program, I feel that our meetings consist of discussions where answering and asking questions really do flow like a natural conversation. I have never felt as if I needed to script my answers or skirt around sensitive topics. When conversation about religion can flow naturally, with questions arising in the moment and answers sparking further talk, interfaith dialogue is truly occurring. I do not feel the same nervousness at our meetings. But I'd like to get to that point in the

outside world as well, so that I can trust myself and relax when delivering answers and allow for a true conversation to develop, which will in turn allow for interfaith relationships to build. Perhaps this nervousness is the problem behind misunderstandings. People are too afraid to talk about what is important, and questions are left unanswered, leaving room for misunderstandings. If we can start viewing religious discussion as conversation, maybe we won't see it as a threat.

A different moment of my recovery experience showed me another beautiful aspect of interfaith relationship. I remember loosening my hijab for the nurse to slip the nasal cannula around my ears before the wisdom-tooth surgery. After I regained consciousness and was allowed to see my family, I remembered that I had loosened my hijab and asked my sister to fix it for me. "It's fine," she responded. I distinctly remembered loosening my scarf to make room for the oxygen device. "No," I said. "I mean, can you tighten it?" She repeated, "It's fine." At the moment, I was still disoriented and didn't understand how this could have happened. Now that I reflect back, I realize that my nurse, who knew nothing about the hijab, had fixed it for me. She did not have to do that. She most probably didn't even fully comprehend why I chose to wear hijab. This, in my opinion, is an embodiment of interfaith relations.

We have been talking about the meaning of interfaith tolerance. Our readings talk about how true interfaith leadership is more than just tolerating or acknowledging the viewpoints of other religions. It is about truly re-

specting another viewpoint, going out of your way to help others practice their religion, and working to create an environment where positive relationships between different religious communities can build. That has been a huge focus of our meetings. We often brainstorm on how to build these communities and bring different religious groups together for a common goal; whether that's a combined volunteer trip, or a visit to other groups' venues of worship.

But what the nurse did was so small-scale and simple. It made me realize how easy these endeavors can be. Although it's heart-warming to see mosques and synagogues come together to help homeless populations, and scroll through pictures of Christians forming protective human rings around Muslims while they pray, these things may only happen every once in a while. There are ways to embrace this idea without expending too much energy. My nurse did not share my beliefs, but she went out of her way to protect my values and fix my hijab for me.

That is the personification of our goals here as Lubar Fellows. Interfaith leadership can be big, like hosting conferences about shared traditions, but it can also be small, like buying your neighbor a Christmas present to help them celebrate a holiday you don't, or refraining from eating in front of your Jewish friends while they fast. Interfaith leadership and dialogue involves changing your actions for the benefit of those around you, despite it not having anything to do with your own beliefs. Being an interfaith leader means doing both big and small things to enhance the connections between faiths.

It is about truly respecting another viewpoint, going out of your way to help others practice their religion, and working to create an environment where positive relationships between different religious communities can build.

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Once we got over that discomfort, we were able to talk about many more things without worrying about formalities.

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THIRD REFLECTION

It's always difficult to allow yourself to be in the hot seat without feeling threatened. As much as I tell myself that I am not bothered by being asked about my faith and my practices, it simply isn't true. I think we all feign confidence whenever we are put in the spotlight, but in reality it can be a very stressful thing. Most people feel afraid that someone will say something offensive, or maybe they're afraid that they will say something wrong. One thing I feel very proud of is how, as a group of Lubar Fellows, we've overcome that fear. I remember feeling slightly uneasy in the beginning of the Fellowship. I was excited and eager to discuss controversial and sensitive topics, but there was always the worry in the back of my mind that I would misrepresent my religion or portray something in an undesirable way.

I'm not sure at what point this happened, but the feeling faded away. I found myself no longer worrying about these things during our meetings. The formalities were no longer there. We were always respectful to each other, but we were no longer overly cautious about not offending anyone. I think this change occurred after we managed to have a couple conversations on difficult topics with each other. Once we got over that discomfort, we were able to talk about many more things without worrying about formalities.

The development of this level of comfort with each other is something that we will be able to reflect on positively. This has also helped us become more comfortable in speaking about

our faiths with others. I believe this is part of what helped us execute an educational day with the Cherokee Middle School sixth graders. We had already had experience in talking about our faith with each other, and I think this helped us to feel a little more relaxed when discussing these things with a new audience.

Children are definitely a different audience than adults. I've always felt more uncomfortable speaking to kids about my religion because they don't have as much awareness of what can be offensive. On top of that, one has to find a balance between providing wholesome information and not providing information that would be too difficult to understand. But our event was quite successful. The beauty of it was that we had people of different faiths working together for a common goal. We had to find ways to display our unique information in the same way, which involved further dialogue amongst ourselves. I think the comfort we found with each other helped us be comfortable in the setting with the kids. Having that foundational security allowed us to speak with the kids more freely.

I saw this same sentiment apparent in another experience involving a group of interfaith individuals coming together to present on different material in the same way. This particular experience was a panel on the topic of faith and feminism and the intersectionality between the two. I, along with a couple of Jewish and Christian women, was asked to speak on this panel and answer questions tugging at the

central theme of whether or not faithfulness and feminism can coexist in one individual. I felt a sense of déjà vu while speaking on this small panel because, as the moderator asked us questions, we all noticed with a pleasant surprise that, despite coming from vastly different backgrounds, we gave similar answers. Each of us felt that faith and feminism can indeed coexist, and we all had somewhat similar ideas about how we reached this conclusion. Everyone brought forth different stories about their experiences with faith and feminism, and everyone was able to present varying perspectives that still allowed us to reach the same conclusions.

This familiarity is something I constantly experience in the Lubar Interfaith Student groups. It's always a pleasant surprise when I share something about my faith and learn that the other traditions have an equivalent concept. I felt a certain happiness when I realized that a lot of the things the women spoke about in this panel were things that I'd already been hearing from my Jewish and Christian Lubar Fellows.

These experiences were among many more that showed me how far we've come as Lubar Fellows. I am proud that we have slowly allowed ourselves to finally feel at home discussing such heated topics, and that I no longer feel anxious before answering questions, at least not with this group of people. We've talked about controversial topics, but we managed to never disrespect each other. Dialogue has felt like a building project, where we were all using communication to create a final intellectual product—that being an understanding and genuine reverence of

one another's perspective. This newly acquired ability to look at another religion's viewpoint with not just curiosity, but deep love and respect, is something that I believe we will all carry with us forever and will have a very positive impact in our lives and human encounters. This is precisely what I wanted to gain from the Lubar Interfaith Student program, and I am ecstatic that the goal has been achieved.

Although I enjoyed all of the Lubar program, projects and all, my favorite parts were the discussions we had. I feel that I grew most during these discussions, reflecting on my own religion as well as trying to understand and collaborate with other religions. I wish only that we had had more time to dive into these topics. Often, one hour didn't feel like enough, and there were many topics that we could have talked about for hours.

My hope moving forward is that the Lubar Institute can continue to provide a consistent and safe environment for this dialogue to occur. These discussions were not only beneficial to each individual, but to the group as a whole, as explaining one's view point on sensitive topics makes one vulnerable, which allowed us all to really grow together. I want to see that this growth continues to be cultivated through dialogue.

I also would love to see more interfaith projects, particularly interfaith volunteering initiatives. One thing I learned from speaking with the other Lubar Fellows is how all three Abrahamic traditions heavily emphasize taking care of others and giving back to the wider community. I think that this would be a way to immerse oneself

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in religious education through a real-world, practical setting, which is just as important as discussing these things.

I believe it will be beneficial to our campus climate to host awareness events for interfaith dialogue. Our Weekend of Worship is an example of an awareness event. We can build on this and also host interfaith panels. Finding unique ways to display a positive interreligious environment on campus will be critical in how students view religion and collaboration.

The activities and goals of the Lubar Institute should live on in the gap year as well as the coming years. The idea of forming interfaith connections and improving attitudes toward religion is much too important, especially looking at current events. I believe we can easily generate new ideas to continue to nurture the values we all learned this year—those of love and respect for one another, as well as finding the comfort in sharing. ●

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Being a Lubar Interfaith Student Fellow this past semester frequently led me to reflect on how religion plays out in our own personal lives. I have always been aware that religion is something very personal, and it is often closely associated with one's value system. Many choose not to share their religious beliefs for this very same reason: doing so might instigate others to assume certain things about the individual.

However, the setting in which Lubar Fellows discussions took place attempted to minimize, if not eliminate, any prejudices or biases against a religious belief because of the individual who represented the faith. Throughout the past semester, I continuously had to ask myself what it truly means to understand the different faiths represented from their standpoint, without having to compromise my own belief system. Finding a balance of being able to fully understand the other religions without my prejudices, and at the same time keeping my own faith, is something that I still have to learn. However, I do have to say that I have

grown tremendously in respect as well as understanding for those who practice religions other than my own.

Recently, with the news and the media blowing up about ISIS, the extreme Islamist terrorists, my empathy was elicited toward Muslims on campus as well as Muslims across America who are the target of hatred at this time of turbulence. It is such a tragedy that so many people are so quick to judge the entire religion without taking the time to understand what Islam is all about. I do have to say that one of the specific ways that I have grown was in respect for Muslim women, despite the prejudices and judgments poured upon

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These discussions allow us to form our thoughts on different religions by placing dignity behind the individuals who practice these faiths.

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them by our society. I say Muslim women, specifically, because many choose to cover themselves out of respect for their religion, even if it means they are placed in a vulnerable position in our Islamophobic society.

One of the discussions that I benefited greatly from was the Forum meeting in which we talked extensively about the gender differences in the Abrahamic faiths. In the past, I have lived in Jordan, a relatively liberal Islamic nation where the majority of the women on the streets wear hijabs. These women, although they may consider themselves as Muslims, may not even think twice about putting on a hijab before going out. Women wearing hijabs has become such a societal norm that has been intertwined with the nation's religious beliefs; wearing a hijab has been integrated into the culture of Jordan. Hence, not wearing a hijab or not covering up one's body would be very countercultural, and consequently would draw attention upon oneself.

However, Muslim women in America face a different problem. Our society in the States is one where wearing a hijab, or covering up oneself too much, draws attention. Although wearing a hijab is an indicator for modesty, this outward portrayal of "modesty" is heavily dependent on context. In America, there is another dimension that is presented that may have a very opposite effect of modesty that it initially intended to have.

Coming from a Christian background, where there was no burden of dressing in a certain way due to religious beliefs, I have always been curious about if it was an absolute require-

ment for Muslims to dress in a certain way. I have learned that Muslim women, too, have their share of freedom with regards to what they choose to wear. While some actively choose to wear hijabs and cover up their bodies out of respect for their religion, some choose not to do so. They believe that, given the context of living in America, not wearing hijab would be a more appropriate way of displaying modesty, as hijabs tend to draw attention to themselves.

Bringing the discussion to my own religion, people have definite prejudices or assumptions about what my values may be, as soon as I tell them that I am a Christian. Because Christians still remain as the majority of the population, we are not as disadvantaged as much as the Fellows who are Jewish or Muslim. However, the Fellows' discussions, as well as the Forums, allowed a setting in which all of us were representing ourselves as individuals, rather than speaking on behalf of our religion.

Overall, these discussions allow us to form our thoughts on different religions by placing dignity behind the individuals who practice these faiths. Judaism as well as Islam has been a minority in the States. Many times, Christianity had dominated as the norm. Due to the lack of familiarity as well as lack of knowledge in regards to these two other Abrahamic faiths, many have been quick to judge and throw around prejudices without a significant basis for beliefs. However, the Lubar Forums and Fellows' meetings have been the initiation step that attempted to raise such meaningful awareness on our UW-Madison campus.

SECOND REFLECTION

I have just returned from a three-week trip to Ethiopia for a global health field study. Given that the primary purpose of the trip was to learn more about the health system infrastructures of Ethiopia as well as the social justice aspect that closely ties in with the definition of “health,” I personally could not help but to see the vital role that religion played in this context.

Ethiopia is mentioned in the Bible several times, and its history of Christianity dates back to the first century A.D. Ethiopia is very interesting, not only in regards to its religious history, but also in its singularity, in that all of its surrounding countries in the sub-Saharan Africa are Muslim nations, yet Ethiopia stands alone as a Christian nation. When I asked the locals as to why Ethiopia is so unique in that way, standing independently as a Christian nation in the midst of Islamic nations, my Ethiopian friend told me that it was the natural geographical barriers, such as the mountains that surrounded the major cities, that blocked a lot of the external influences from overtaking the long-lived Christian history in Ethiopia.

Although Christianity is considered to be the religion that the majority practice, Islam is not too far behind when considering the number of believers. As our team moved further from the capital, Addis Ababa, we were told that we were moving toward villages which had a majority of Muslims. However, one thing that I found very interesting was the inability to distinguish between Christianity and Islam due to the similarity of the practices of the Orthodox

Christians and those of the Muslims. The women of both religions wear head coverings and cover most of their body to signify modesty. Given that we had visited Ethiopia during the Ethiopian calendar’s Advent seasons, it could have been that the Ethiopians were particularly more religious in practice than during other times of the year.

Having lived in Jordan, a primarily Muslim nation, I have always associated loud prayer calls with the Azan calls from local mosques. However, in Ethiopia, Christian churches also had prayer calls throughout the day. While the Azan calls happened only five times a day, the prayer calls from the nearby Ethiopian Christian church was audible throughout the whole day during the days leading up to Christmas. I was very impressed by the level of religiousness of the Ethiopians, for I have never been to a Christian nation that was as religious as Ethiopia, especially on Sundays. We would walk down the street to see a majority of people wearing white for the church services. Whenever we were in predominantly Christian areas, we saw that most of the vehicles and homes had pictures of saints.

I had the opportunity to visit an Orthodox church and a Protestant church while I was in one of the rural villages of Ethiopia. In order to visit the local Orthodox church, we got up at 7 o’clock in the morning to walk up the mountain where the church was. Despite the fact that we had comfortable clothing and comfortable walking shoes, it was a struggle to walk up the mountain. It took a significant amount

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of time to reach the church. On the other hand, many local Ethiopians passed us by. Some did not have shoes, and some were even carrying gallons of water as they were walking up. As I saw these locals taking this literal “hike” as their weekly route to church, I really admired their commitment and made a promise to myself never to complain about going to church early on Sunday mornings.

It took us more than an hour to hike up the mountain, and we were already late by the time we reached the Orthodox church. We sat outside the gates of the church, where the landscape of the mountain stretched down to give us a full view of the village. There were larger trees that surrounded the church, and we enjoyed the refreshing air and the view as we listened to the prayer calls coming from inside. Although my experience at the Orthodox church did not fully encompass a religious service, the worship of the Orthodox Christians, and its similarity to the religiousness of the local Muslims, was very interesting to see.

We also visited the local Protestant church on Ethiopian Christmas. Surprisingly, the Protestant church wasn’t too different from the Protestant services that I had attended in the States. As soon as we went, there was an extended time of personal prayer. There was a leader in the front who seemed to call out the different prayer topics for the church members to pray with. As the members of the church trickled in, they joined the rest of the congregation in vocal prayer. When the service started, there was a time of worship with music and singing. Afterward,

there was a sermon. This structure is very similar to my own services at Harvest Church of Madison, so I was much more comfortable in this particular church setting.

Personally, my visit to the Ethiopian Protestant church was very encouraging. It really made me think more deeply and mediate on how the God that I serve is not an “American” God, but rather a global God. However, the role that God plays in the Ethiopian context is much wider than in America.

It is common to observe that, as nations develop, religion has less of a role in people’s lives, as they start to depend on their capabilities rather than relying on a god. Ethiopia, as a developing nation, may not hold on to its religious identity in line with the trend, but, at the same time, I don’t want to associate their high level of religiousness with their development status. It almost seemed as if being religious (either Muslim or Christian) was deeply embodied in their cultural identity; the intersection of religion and ethnic identity was something that seemed to evolve together.

Countries throughout Europe, as well as America, were once Christian nations, but Christianity has currently become an idea that is considered subversive to society. We as a society have come to a point where talking about religion is something “that you leave out on the doorsteps.” I have been so encouraged to see religion playing a large role in the lives of the Ethiopians, and the religious values that have been instilled in Ethiopian society. My hope is that countries like Ethiopia will not push aside religion in the future, on

their pathways to development as Western nations have done. I hope that they

learn to embrace the religious values so closely associated with their histories.

THIRD REFLECTION

Reflecting on my journal from the beginning of the academic year, I distinctly remember not knowing what it means to start interreligious conversations. Sure, you can have smalltalk with others about how you identify yourself, yet when the conversations delve in deeper to what you actually believe, people start to get uncomfortable, if not offended, by the differences of beliefs. I rarely have had opportunities to talk about religious differences with those around me, nor did I have the vocabulary to talk about it in a “politically correct manner.” However, the fear of “not wanting to offend others” perpetrated further misunderstanding, and now I see the uttermost importance of interreligious conversations in the world that we live today. Looking back over the past year, I stand on more solid ground than where I was a year ago through what I have learned in the Lubar Institute program.

Throughout this past academic year, I saw myself becoming a more competent ally, especially for the Muslims in our community in the midst of our society’s persisting Islamophobia. As a Christian in America, I hold many religious privileges that my fellow Americans belonging to other minority religious groups do not experience. The fundamental value system of America is built upon roots from Christianity. More so, American society, for numerous centuries, has infused its

religious values and beliefs into the societal structure by calibrating them to be the norm. Therefore, those who do not identify as Christian are often identified in an “other” category that perpetrates systemic violence, and at the least, macroaggressions. Even over the past year, there have been numerous terrorist-related incidents that placed burdens not only on the afflicted communities but also on Muslim communities. Because of the inability of many Americans to distinguish between mainstream Islamic beliefs and those of the extremists, blame for terrorist acts automatically was shifted onto all Muslims. However, this blame-shifting culture needs to change by acknowledging that these acts of terror do not define the religion.

“Otherism” is a pernicious thing in our society. It places those who are different from us in a box and attaches a singular label to them that refuses to accept the individual and his/her experiences. However, this “zone of othering” is where interfaith dialogue must take place if we are to break down preconceived notions regarding an individual’s identity and embrace the individual as a whole. The dialogues in the Lubar Interfaith Student groups made me realize the privileges that I hold, as a member of a religious majority, privileges that I will use to stand up for my fellow Muslim brothers and sisters, who are still oppressed by negative

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stereotypes and misunderstandings of their religion.

One of the most valuable things that I have learned throughout the Lubar Interfaith Fellowship is to acknowledge and to validate the experiences of those from other traditions, to focus on the similarities that we share rather

than succumbing to “otherism” by focusing only on the differences that divide us. Only through actively engaging such conversation with those of other faiths can we further build a community where acceptance and awareness can take place. ●

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The Lubar Interfaith Student Fellow experience is in itself unique. There was not any setting that I know of, academic or otherwise, that has a similar layout of putting people from the three Abrahamic religions together and have them meet weekly and talk about their personal perspectives and experiences in and about religion. The personal interactions that result from these meetings is the best outcome I can imagine.

One of the highlights of the past few months for me was the introductory meeting with one of the other Fellows. We got together in a very casual meeting over lunch and we talked for two hours about our backgrounds, family, experience with religion, politics, and our expectations of being Fellows with the Lubar Institute. I think it would be really useful to encourage those smaller meetings—maybe schedule everyone to meet with everyone individually. I think there would be fewer inhibitions when you speak to someone face-to-face and open up about the personal details of your life that led you to want to be part of this program

and what you can do together to foster this philosophy in your surroundings.

Another memorable point was the discussion about the book *Abraham: A Journey to the Heart of Three Faiths*. It reasserted my conviction that the three Abrahamic religions have a lot more in common than is believed by the general public because we rarely try to read about what “the others” have and believe. The detailed examples and flowing discussion about the book was very reassuring, in a way, and it gave me even more hope that people could come together and that differences between religions would never be a problem if people approach each other with good intentions.

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One of the highlights of the Lubar Fellows experience was going to the three places of worship.

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I think the flow of the meetings was balanced between trying to focus on a theme and opening it up for discussion of current affairs or a question that would be thrown in spontaneously. I particularly remember that heated discussion about death and life after death. It wasn't that easy to get us out of the

room because everybody was really into it.

If there was one thing I would suggest for the following sessions, it would be doing fun activities together instead of some sessions. For example, playing volleyball once could reflect the humanness we share and would be really fun!

SECOND REFLECTION

One of the highlights of the Lubar Fellows experience was going to the three places of worship. I enjoyed it because it allowed me to invite friends and even my students be witness this unique experience in Madison, which only the Lubar Institute offers. I also really enjoyed the discussion that happened after visiting the church, which was the third place of worship. I was very glad to see that a lot of people who are not part of the Institute still took an active role in the discussion itself. I was glad to hold back a little bit in my participation to give room to people who might not have the same opportunity for interfaith discussion that I have with the Lubar Institute. It is important that people from different faiths have the opportunity to meet and talk with each other so that misunderstandings are corrected and we can come closer and discover how similar our three Abrahamic religions are.

This year in particular, the visit to UW Hillel was very interesting because I had an unexpected discussion afterward with three Israelis. If you know any Syrians who grew up in Syria, watching the media, which is always instilling fear against the "others" (Is-

raelis), then you would be surprised to hear of a Syrian having a calm discussion with Israelis. During the dinner, a discussion started about my city, Aleppo, and Jews who used to live there. I was glad to be asked a lot of questions about my city and how life is in my city. I, in turn, asked questions to the people at my table, who were from Jerusalem.

Jerusalem is the third most holy city for Muslims, and every Muslim would yearn to visit that city. However, it is under occupation, and Syrians are not allowed to enter. The situation in Jerusalem is very important to me. The Israelis expressed their opinions openly, and I listened respectfully, even though I did not agree with all of them. One person mentioned that he believes that the Jewish faith is not a religion, but a nationality. He said that Israelis are not inviting anyone to join the Jewish faith. In fact, he believes that only Jewish-born people should live in the Jewish state. I disagreed with him because that would be very noninclusive to all the Muslims and Christians who have been living there for centuries, side by side with Jews.

We also discussed the occupation. I told them how, even though the Syrian

media often portrayed all Jews as Zionists, when I came to the United States and met many Jews who were not Zionists, I came to realize that people are people everywhere and that there are many differences in opinion, even among Jews themselves. That helped me to develop and form my own opinions and think for myself. When people at the table heard me say that, they agreed, even though we do not share the same opinion on the occupation.

THIRD REFLECTION

As the Lubar Institute year is closing, I can't help but feel this longing for it already and wish I had more time to spend as a Fellow.

Looking back to last year when I was a member of the Forum, I can say that the Fellowship experience is unique because of the closeness to the other Fellows that you meet with every week and the interactions beyond these regular meetings.

I've always enjoyed our meetings, but I particularly enjoyed when we had time to discuss topics that would come from genuine questions and curiosity to know about the other. I remember the meeting when we talked about an article on female leaders in the three Abrahamic religions. That turned into a discussion about women's roles and limitations in the three faiths, and the conversation then branched out to the topic of dating and marriage. The two-hour-long discussion after the visits to the places of worship was memorable for me because of the interest that people who were guests of the Lubar Insti-

tute have shown. These unframed sessions, when conducted with sensitivity and intentions to learn, are the most successful ones in my opinion.

Conversations like these, that happen unexpectedly, are the most exciting conversations for me. They are spontaneous, genuine, and reflect our humane side. I enjoy when such conversations happen in our weekly Forum meetings. I think it is very unfortunate that a lot of people like me will not have the opportunity to be part of these discussions because of the decision to cut the funding for the Lubar Institute next year.

The two group projects that the Fellows worked on together were also great opportunities to still come together even closer. I can't forget the look in the eyes of those school kids when they were asking us questions after going through the learning stations on basic concepts in the three Abrahamic religions. It was pure joy to see a sample of this generation, as few as they were, witnessing such a unique event. Learning to write one's name in Arabic and Hebrew from Muslims and Jews at the same station is an experience that will have its impact on the way these kids think about religions and interfaith dialogue for all of their lives.

I don't know if we could have the same outcome of this event if we had spent less time on planning and talking about it, and dedicated more time to talk about other topics in our weekly meetings, but I am sure that the next group

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of Fellows will benefit from this experience and add to it. So, I would say, all in all, the time spent on this event was worth it.

I still remember when we met the group of Fellows from the previous year. One of the recommendations that I heard from one of them was that we shouldn't be too afraid to offend as long as we are keeping in mind that this space is meant to be for learning about our own faith as well as the other two. It was the times that we had those honest and open conversations that I learned the most. For example, one of the topics that was surprisingly rich was death and the concept of judgment day.

If there is one thing I will take from this experience, it will be that I will always be a Fellow, in a sense, in this interfaith community around me and I will always implement the practices that I learned from the Lubar Institute.

I'm grateful for everyone who helped this great idea of an interfaith venue come to existence in this school. Thank you, my fellow fellows and forum members! Thank you, Ulrich, for your constant efforts to make this experience a meaningful one for all of us! I think that if peace were to come about, it would because of dialogue and listening to each other. ●

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The Lubar Interfaith Fellowship has definitely changed me significantly, especially in my understanding of interfaith dialogue. I began the Fellowship with an idea of what I wanted to learn, but not what that learning would result in. Throughout my time as a Lubar Fellow, I have realized that, more than anything, interfaith dialogue is dependent on mutual respect and open-mindedness. When I write about open-mindedness, I do not mean an act of tolerance. I mean the state of being capable of understanding another person's perspective and allowing that perspective a level of importance.

When I was applying to the Fellowship, I was told by someone that I would probably not get the position. However, I still applied, because I wanted to ensure that I did not miss such a great opportunity as a result of a little discouragement. This is my first year attending the Forum, and it is amazing to have the opportunity to hear so many different opinions.

I am also involved in a program called Intercultural Dialogues. It is a Sociology class that allows students to take part in conversations like race and

gender. Having that experience take place at the same time as being a Lubar Fellow has been significantly impactful. During our unit on religion, I was able to speak in a manner that was logical and reasoned. I think this can be attributed to the personal growth I have undergone so far because of the Lubar Institute. The Forum allowed a wider dialogue, but I appreciate how the Fellowship goes more in depth and looks at religion through a personal lens.

My first interaction with the Lubar Interfaith Student program was last

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Although I was interested in learning about every religion involved, I came to the Fellowship craving knowledge of my own religion. I was very excited to learn more about my own tradition through the other Muslim Fellows.

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year at orientation. Honestly, it was a little intimidating. Seeing the past Fellows and hearing them speak was daunting.

I come from a background of personal education and Sunday school. I had no formal Islamic education. So, when I heard previous Lubar Fellows speaking, I felt as if I wasn't going to bring enough to the table. Although we are halfway into the year and I feel much more comfortable opening up with Fellows than I did at the beginning of the year, I still think that the second semester will be an even greater journey for me. Regardless of the fact that this group is a medium for which interfaith dialogue has a purpose and objective, it takes time to feel comfortable talking about religion. However, the Fellowship provided a safe space in which I knew that at least I would not be ridiculed for the beliefs I held.

It is selfish, but, although I was interested in learning about every religion involved, I came to the Fellowship craving knowledge of my own religion. I was very excited to learn more about my own tradition through the other Muslim Fellows. I was also very curious to see what the Christian and Jewish Fellows had to say about Islam. The main public dialogue heard from non-Muslims about Muslims is filled with political rhetoric, and I thought this experience would be a refreshing change.

I went through freshman year of college really wanting to be part of a dialogue that made a clear separation between religion from politics. As I took part in Lubar Fellowship dialogues and attended the Forum, I came

to be increasingly interested in learning about other religions. When Judaism and Christianity were brought up, I was genuinely intrigued, probably even more so than when Islam was talked about. Throughout the semester I came to a realization (I had this realization before beginning the Fellows program but did not see it in action until afterward) that I could not be a part of the Lubar Institute program without being interested in spreading knowledge about my religion and learning about others in the process. It was all about mutual benefit and respect.

As mentioned before, I was not completely confident in how comprehensive my knowledge was of Islam before partaking in the Lubar program. Once I began the actual dialogue portion of the program, this fear was solidified. Although I did not particularly like the book, *Abraham: A Journey Into the Heart of Three Faiths*, it gave me new insight into my religion and left me wanting to do independent research. Of course, religion is one of those things that one has to find on one's own—one cannot have their hand held throughout religious education (if that education is meant to be spiritually impactful). There comes a time when independent action must be taken, and I took that this year. I began reading a biography on the life of the Prophet, *Muhammad: His Life Based on the Earliest Sources*, by Martin Lings. I am still in the process of reading it, and it is giving me a more intellectual background of my religion. I plan on compiling a list of books that touch on all three Abrahamic religions, and then expanding it to involve other religions.

I loved the art project. The activity provided an opportunity to be a part of something less structured and more organic. Structure is important, but it is not bad to deviate from it once in a while. The most interesting thing here, in my opinion, was the way that the project took form, even though there was no requirement for what the end product was supposed to be like. I think that, more than anything, the end project illustrated how interfaith dialogue depends on the coming together of religions rather than their separation.

Today, I find myself asking questions whenever religion is involved in something. I question what I have always been taught about my religion because I have to wonder whether these are facts or mix-ups between religion and culture. I am curious to see how the rest of the year goes in terms of personal growth and collective growth. I feel very lucky to have this chance and hope that religious curiosity drives interfaith dialogue to a point where it is an everyday phenomenon.

SECOND REFLECTION

My father tells me that he is a man of all religions. He has been saying this for as long as I can remember. In the past, this statement has perplexed me, sometimes to the point of frustration. How is it possible for a man who has self-identified as a Muslim his entire life proclaim himself a man of all religions? The two of us would get into heated debates, arguments even, about this seemingly contradictory statement. In my confusion, his reasoning was empty to me. That is, until I participated the Lubar Fellowship.

What does it mean to be of “all religions?” The most obvious implication of this statement is that, instead of adhering to the teachings of a single ideology, one accepts the ideologies of all. However, this begs the question, is this identification simply aspirational, or is it achievable? Do “all religions” teach fundamentally the same thing? The answer to that, of course, is no, they do not. Religion is a fascinatingly complex phe-

nomena that is not uniform throughout. Religions are unique in their teachings, yet they do have some things in common, among which are the recognition of a higher being and the importance of building religious community.

When my father holds these conversations with me, he implores me to look beyond the life that I have been born and raised into: that of a Muslim. These reoccurring conversations were one thing that drew me to apply for the program. Now, one and a half semesters in, the decision feels like a good one.

I think about the answer to the question: how has the Lubar Institute contributed to my growth as a Muslim and member of larger society? A simple answer does not come to mind. After all, the acquisition of knowledge in a single subject—in this case, interreligious dialogue—does not limit one to applying this knowledge exclusively to that subject. Knowledge in anything is applicable, in my opinion, to almost

I think about the answer to the question: how has the Lubar Institute contributed to my growth as a Muslim and member of larger society?

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From what I have read, religion, as an interpretative concept, is a force for peace as much as it is a force for conflict.

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everything. So, when I learned about the similarities and differences in the Abrahamic origins of Islam, Christianity, and Judaism, I found myself applying this education not only to religious discussion, but also to several other conversations that compared seemingly polar ideologies or opinions.

This semester, I am taking a politics and human rights class. One of the recurring arguments in human rights discourse concerns the role religion played in the conceptualization and drafting of human rights doctrine. I find these conversations spectacularly interesting, especially since the Fellowship requires that Fellows complete readings every week, many of which have broached the topic of religion as a means to solve violence. From what I have read, religion, as an interpretative concept, is a force for peace as much as it is a force for conflict.

Another stubborn topic in human rights is of the origins of morality. Is it something that stems from religion, or is it innate? My religion teaches that humans have the potential for both good and bad, so I lean toward the answer that religion promotes morality. I can say that I have experienced this personally. The Fellows, to whom I

am fortunate enough to speak to once a week (or more!), are amazing examples of religion as a moral force. I have realized that since they know much about their religions and are interested in learning more about others, they are kind and compassionate. I have seen examples of the opposite in my own religion: people who are ignorant of one of the central themes of Islam (kindness, kindness, kindness) and are more callous and prone to holding hateful opinions. I am absolutely sure that this is applicable across the board for those with faith backgrounds. And, of course, those without a faith background also find balance between good and bad in their own, respectful ways.

I am very interested to see where, at the end of the next few months, the Lubar Institute takes me on my religious journey. I began this paper with an anecdote from my personal life, about my father and me. The questions that he posed to me through his own narratives have transformed from provocative and frustrating prompts to things that make me want to pursue knowledge and appreciate it once it has been gained. Looking forward to the rest of the year!

REFLECTION THREE

Religion. Such a loaded concept. What does it mean to be the member of a religion? What does it mean to be religious? By being in an Abrahamic faith, am I part of something bigger? On almost every Tuesday of the 2015–16 school year, the Lubar Fellowship pro-

gram urged me to reflect on all of these questions.

Coming in, I doubted my ability to represent my religion. The thing is, I am not a representative of my religion. I chose to apply to Lubar to give myself the opportunity to grow into someone

who would be a contributing member of a global community of people belonging to different faiths. I also applied so that I could spend part of my week doing something other than worrying about my GPA and how to window-dress my resumé. Being a Lubar Fellow was a time commitment that made things more than about just me; the time was about the other Fellows and what we wanted to contribute to the rest of the world.

I am not a representative of my religion, because my religion belongs to me. Though there are 1.3 billion Muslims worldwide, and though we follow the same core tenets of Islam, I am an individual in my relationship to Allah (swt). The Lubar Fellowship urged me to appreciate the nuances that are present in peoples' perceptions of their different faiths, and made me see the beauty in religion's rigid fluidity.

The first semester was an introduction into a type of dialogue that was so different than any I'd ever taken part in before. To add to this, the dynamic between my classes and the Lubar Institute group was very interesting. I was part of a class called "Intercultural Dialogues," which worked to deconstruct concepts such as race, gender, and socioeconomic status using historical fact and the realities of present day.

Around the middle of the semester, we came upon the topic of religion. I walked into class that day, prepared to give a staunch defense of Islam as a religion that does not condone ISIS, Al-Qaeda, Al-Nusra Front, etc. However, when class began, I was surprised by the lack of such inquiries (ironically enough, I was asked that question lat-

er in the semester). No one was accusing the Islam as the source of all problems in the world. Instead, they asked me questions and spoke about their personal journeys in their respective faith backgrounds. I remember feeling a sense of freedom, because I could explain my interpretation of Islam without having to worry about preconceived notions. That was a moment in which I felt thankful for a space that allowed me to represent what I, as the only Muslim in the room, thought Islam was.

In contrast, the Fellows' meeting on the next night allowed me to delve into the depths of Islam's origin, with a conversation on Ibrahim/Abram/Abraham. That Tuesday, we chose to meet on the roof of Hillel, where some of the Jewish students at UW-Madison had built a Sukkah for Sukkot. There was a freedom in coming together, with people who knew about my religion, and who shared a commonality with it, to speak on that commonality, and be able to learn about my own faith in the process. Shivering from lack of jacket (it was fall, I should have known better), and participating in a fruitful conversation about the history of the Abrahamic faiths, I was extremely grateful for the Lubar program, and remained so throughout the year.

Fast forward five months, and the Lubar Interfaith Students program was still giving me the opportunity to grow and thrive in an interfaith setting. On April 11 and 12, the Fellows were given the chance to create a workshop for sixth graders from Cherokee Middle School. We spent weeks planning with each other to ensure that the students understood that Islam, Judaism, and

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Christianity value peace and harmony. Earlier in this reflection, I had mentioned that no one in my “Intercultural Dialogues” class asked me about ISIS until I was questioned about it later in the year. This was that day. At the beginning of the workshop, we held a mini forum during which students could ask us any questions they had about religion. ISIS (as a group now being used to exemplify the worst in humanity), was mentioned: “How does a group like ISIS, who use Islam as a justification for their actions, promote the idea that religion is a source for good?” It should be noted that this question was not asked by a sixth grader!

I was stumped. How does one approach this question in a room full of sixth graders, if one does not understand their own opinion on the subject? I got over that quickly, though. This was an opening for me to make my case to a group of children who were at such a formative stage in their lives. The misconceptions they held then had the chance of following them through to adulthood. I stated what I believed: ISIS is a purely political entity, abusing a peaceful text, taking it out of context, and essentially playing a game with the

world. It unfortunately targets those most susceptible to corrupt influence to join their ranks. Keeping in mind the fact that I was speaking to middle schoolers, I worded my answer differently at the time. During the rest of the workshop, I gradually grew more impressed with the way that some of the students interacted with the material. I would not have gotten the opportunity to work with these children or experience the personal growth that I did during the forum, without the Lubar interfaith program.

During this year, I have learned what it means to actively listen and legitimately respect others’ opinions and backgrounds. I was given a program in which I could voice my thoughts on religion with a level of impunity. The Lubar Institute allowed me to meet people and be in a space where I could openly love my religion. As I finish my last two years at UW–Madison, and *insha’Allah* pave my way in this world, the knowledge I gained as a Lubar Fellow will remain with me. Thank you to Ulrich, and the rest of the Fellows for truly making this experience what it was. ●

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Samantha Rosenbloom

Senior
Political Science and
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The past few months as a Lubar Fellow have been more than I could have asked for. I've always had an interest and a passion for discussing religion. As a history major, I generally end up taking a class that relates to religion each semester. Classes like "The History of Spirituality," "Religions of the Ancient Mediterranean," and "African Americans and Jews in Urban Society" have continued to spark my interest in religion, its history, and its societal impacts. The Lubar Interfaith Student Fellows program has given me the opportunity to take this interest out of the classroom and out of my synagogue to have a real-life discussion about interfaith relations and coexistence.

One of the top reasons why I love the Lubar program is that college students, who I feel are often dismissed as being too young, too naïve, and too idealistic, are given the opportunity to voice their opinions in a judgment-free environment. Everything that is said in our weekly discussions as well as Forum is given real weight.

I feel like there are so many instanc-

es I could pull from this semester that contained meaningful discussions and interesting insights, but for the sake of brevity, I'll limit myself to just a few.

The month-long art project through Wheelhouse Studios was definitely the highlight of the semester. To be completely honest, I expected the art project to be a total failure. I had such low expectations for dialoguing through

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art, I suppose there was no where else to go but up. I was so happy to be proven wrong! I came away amazed at our own collective creativity.

I think our success as a group can be boiled down to two factors: 1) our willingness as Fellows to come together and work through issues; and 2) our directions from the studio director. Everything he had us do was very pointed, and he was great at pulling out our thoughts and creativity. It was especially interesting how similar our ideas for a theme were when we came together as a whole after having discussed our thoughts in smaller groups. I think almost everyone had “unity” as one of their driving words for the discussion, and it really showed in our piece!

On top of the success of actually “completing” our art piece, I loved the dialogue that emerged from the creative process. While I think what we do every week, sitting in a circle talking and discussing, is important and beneficial, I felt that the discussions we had throughout the project came more organically. There was no set agenda or topic. As we painted, everyone started asking questions, and this conversation sparked an interesting discussion.

I think that this project also brought us, as Fellows, closer together. We had the opportunity to be silly and this informal setting allowed us to let loose a bit. After our Wheelhouse project, I feel closer to the other Fellows than I ever did before. I hope that, in future years, this project or a similar one remains part of the Fellowship syllabus. This was a unique opportunity to experience dialogue in a new way, one

which opened my eyes to so many more possibilities and experiences for future discussion.

Finally, I particularly enjoyed the discussion we had that asked, “What is interfaith dialogue?” and “How does one become an interfaith leader?” We discussed what is necessary for interfaith dialogue to function and how we could be interfaith leaders.

I think that this was an important thing to talk about at the beginning of the semester, because every Fellow or, to expand, every person has the potential to be an interfaith leader in the community. I came away from the discussion empowered to make something happen. I feel that there is so much potential in our group of Fellows to move discussion from our little room in the Humanities Building to the wider campus community, to Madison, to the state of Wisconsin, and beyond.

After that discussion, I felt a new drive to really do something. Nothing has come of this discussion yet, but I hope that we come together as Fellows to put on an event or a panel, something that brings what we do to the wider community. There are so many opportunities for growth and learning, I just hope that we take advantage. We live in such an interesting time and place in history, with so much hatred, misunderstanding and ignorance toward religion, Islam especially. I think we as Fellows have a duty to combat this ignorance by taking steps to form interfaith friendships, relationships, and discussion.

I’m so excited to see what is in store for us next semester!

SECOND REFLECTION

This winter break, I went on a Birthright Israel trip. Although there have been so many amazing things happening in the Lubar Institute this semester, I want to focus this reflection on my experiences on Birthright and on the concept of putting yourself in other's shoes, trying to understand their experiences.

I have to preface talking about Birthright by saying that I had very little connection to Israel as a Jew. Honestly, as a history major, I was more intrigued by Israel from a historical and even biblical perspective. I always saw Israel as this amazing place with all this history, but it held no sentimental value.

I was also extremely hesitant about going on Birthright. Most people go on Birthright within the first few semesters of college, even though Birthright eligibility extends until you are 26. As a senior, I was the oldest person on the trip, even older than all the Israeli soldiers who accompanied us. It took a lot of convincing from Adam, Hillel's Birthright Coordinator, to finally get me to consider signing up.

My hesitation stemmed from the very essence of what a Birthright trip is meant to be. Birthright brings young Jews in the diaspora Israel, with the idea that they will fall in love with the country and take that support back to their home country. I don't wholly disagree with the premise. I think you can fall in love with a culture and the beauty that surrounds you anywhere you travel. As we all know, Israel is a sticky subject, and I was concerned that I was going to be fed pro-Israel propaganda.

Nevertheless, I decided to partake and go in with an open mind. For the most part, I felt that the trip as a whole was geared toward getting me to love Israel, and sometimes I felt that real conversations weren't really being held with the whole group. Group activities were geared toward how we identify as Jewish in a cultural sense, surrounding issues like interfaith marriage or how often we go to synagogue.

I wanted to have some real conversations about Israel, and I felt that we didn't have them. I had to seek that out on my own, which I'm so glad I did! I spoke with some Israelis on the trip, a few soldiers, and our tour guide. It was so interesting hearing their own opinions, which ran the gamut on the political spectrum. I feel that my world view was expanded so much in just 10 days, but I realize that I had sought that out on my own rather than the trip providing that for me.

Israel is such a beautiful place, and we did so many amazing things, like praying at the Western Wall, hiking up Masada, floating in the Dead Sea, taking a camel ride in the Negev, spending the night under the stars in a Bedouin tent, experiencing life on a kibbutz, and so much more. While these experiences were absolutely amazing, they made it so easy to forget the very real conflict that is happening in Israel and the surrounding areas.

There are a few experiences that stuck out to me as particularly moving, and brought everything thing back down to Earth. The first few days of the trip were spent in the Golan Heights,

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which has gone back and forth between Israeli and Syrian control. Huge swaths of land are fenced off because of mine fields left over from the wars there. While in the Golan Heights, we also spent some time on the summit of Mount Bental, which literally looks over the Israeli-Syrian border. We were told that we were looking at an ISIS controlled area of Syria. In the hour we were on the summit, we could hear bombs going off on the Syrian side of the border and Israeli army drills on the other side. Both of these experiences made the history of the area very real to me and brought the current conflict into a more personal perspective.

While I could go on and on about moments that brought me back to the conflicts in Israel, there was one more circumstance that particularly stuck out to me. On one of our final days of the trip, we visited Sderot. Sderot is a small town that is less than a half mile from Gaza. Every home as a bomb shelter attached to it, and the town received a generous donation from the Jewish National Fund to build a bombproof playground for the children of the town. The bombproof playground really struck a chord with me. I couldn't help thinking about all of the innocent children on both sides of the conflict

who have been brought up in fear for their lives. Sderot was lucky to have this sanctuary for their children, but do the children in Gaza have the same? I don't know. As someone with young brothers and who works with children, this really hit me.

I know that these conflicts are so big and beyond me, but for the first time in my life they became very real. You begin to recognize that these are people just like me with thoughts and feelings of their own, who live their lives with the reality of conflict and violence. I was able to look across borders to Syria and Gaza at people whom I may never know, but I realize that they likely feel the same as do the Israelis in Sderot. It breaks my heart that it is so easy to de-humanize these situations and dismiss them as problems "way over there." Why should Americans care about the suffering of people in other places, when we have our own suffering here? I know that this sounds so naïve, but I think we should care about human suffering everywhere, which is hard to do when you don't see it for yourself. I came away from my Birthright trip extremely appreciative of the experience that I had and I hope that it has made me a better, more sympathetic person.

THIRD REFLECTION

This year at the Lubar Institute has been more than I could have hoped for. I've not only learned so much, but gained meaningful friendships. The one experience that sticks out from this semester is the Day of Worship. I feel

that I took away not just a greater understanding of religious practices, but also insight into certain dynamics between and within the Abrahamic traditions.

We began the day with Jumu'ah

prayer at the Islamic Center of Madison. I had been to the Center once before for a Jumu'ah service three years ago, but this was a completely different experience. This was the first time that I took part in prayer and the first time that I wore a hijab in earnest. I have worn a hijab while traveling in Turkey for entrance into religious sites and mosques. However, a hijab doesn't stick out at all in Turkey, but here I felt incredibly aware of my surroundings. I wore the hijab for all of 15 minutes outside of the Islamic Center and I was so conscious of people looking at me and perhaps judging me.

I wish I had asked one of the Muslim girls in the Lubar Interfaith Student program how they feel about walking around campus in a hijab. I wonder if I just felt uncomfortable because it was so outside of my norm. The physical act of praying was so interesting and actually reminded me of Jewish services. In Judaism we bow at certain words or phrases to show a respect toward G-d, so the process of prostrating didn't feel completely alien to me. One thing that I love about Judaism is the constant repetition and traditions that are upheld. I felt that the physical aspect of prostrating, and repeating that five times a day, was extremely similar to something that I feel strongly about in Judaism.

Sunday services were an interesting experience for me. My mom is Catholic, and I was raised with both traditions in my home to a certain extent. I went to Mass from time to time, and we celebrated Christmas and Easter. However, I felt that the Christian service was the most foreign to me. I identify so strongly as a Jew rather than Chris-

tian. I actually feel closer in tradition to the Muslim Fellows rather than to the Christian Fellows.

Upon reflection, I think that the main cause of my distance from Christianity is the fact that I identify so much with my minority experience as a Jew. I think that this is something that Muslims in America can relate to as well, and while Christians can empathize, they'll never truly know what it's like to be a minority in this country.

I don't think that I was the only one who felt a distancing at the Sunday Service. While almost everyone took part in Jumu'ah prayers and Hillel's Shabbat Service, I was the only non-Christian who decided to take Communion even though we were welcomed to by the pastor. While I cannot speak for the Muslim Fellows, and I by all means do not speak for all Jews, I feel like the historic persecution and misunderstanding of our peoples by Christians creates boundaries even today.

I think this is one of the greatest tragedies and one of the biggest reasons why the Lubar Interfaith Student program is so important. It is here to break down all barriers and dispel all myths about each religious tradition. We cannot change the past but we can our perceptions and our actions in the future.

In our last session, we talked about what we love and hate most in our traditions. Everyone said that they hate when people use religion to incite violence and hatred. This happens in every tradition; there are people who fundamentally do not understand the core of the Abrahamic faiths. This core is and always will be goodness, kindness, and

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love for oneself, one's community, and the world.

For the three years, friends and acquaintances have told me about the Lubar Institute program. Some of my best friends on campus were past Lubar Fellows. I can't even begin to thank them for pushing me to become a Lubar Fellow and to have this year of exploration and discovery! I have such high hopes for the Institute and see it as becoming an integral part of campus life.

This year, and this semester in particular, has opened my eyes to the lack of cultural competency and humility on the UW campus. The Center for Religion and Global Citizenry is so necessary to achieving a UW that I want to be proud of. I hope that the new institute moves to the forefront of campus, leading the conversation surrounding diversity and cultural understanding. I think every student should be aware

of its existence and importance to the campus community and culture.

To achieve this, I hope that the new center plans to have a strategic marketing and social media campaign surrounding its opening and its activities. I believe that this will help create awareness, but also make the center a voice of authority and leadership surrounding understanding.

I think that the Fellowship program is important to continue and perhaps it could be expanded to two or three cohorts. I could see the Fellowship becoming a class or freshman experience, like the First-Year Interest Groups Program (FIGs). This is such an important program and central to making steps toward cultural understanding. I can't sing the Lubar Institute's praises high enough; I wish everyone could experience it. One thing I will say, is that if I'm still in Madison in 2017, count me in. ●

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This first semester of the Lubar Fellowship has been much different than I expected and, to be honest, I'm struggling to put my experiences into words. I came into this group feeling very strong in my faith and thinking that I was a good representative of what it means to be a Christian. However, the more meetings I attend, the more I realize that I may not be as knowledgeable about my religion as I thought. I still consider myself strong in my faith. However, this group is certainly making me reevaluate how I identify as a Christian and how I relate personally to God.

The first thing that I have learned from my experience with the Lubar Interfaith Student program is the complexity of interreligious dialogue. From the Forum last year, I had the impression that interreligious dialogue is easy when in an open and honest group of people. Through careful reflection though, I realized that my previous experience wasn't with true dialogue but instead was an informational experience. Last year the Forum allowed me to gain an appreciation for and under-

standing of the other two Abrahamic faiths, which is an opportunity that I consider myself lucky to have had. I was able to learn much about what, on the surface, makes a Jew a Jew and a Muslim a Muslim through careful comparisons and contrasts with my faith as a Christian. The Forum was an important step in my pursuit to understand the other faiths by providing me with the necessary background information, but it wasn't the dialogue that the Fellowship seeks.

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The second lesson that I've learned is how vastly different individuals within the same tradition can be.

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In my opinion, the Fellowship promotes conversations that go beyond this informational stage to a level of deeper meaning. The Fellowship is where students have the opportunity to share what their faith personally means to them, how it shapes their worldviews, and even challenge and disagree with certain parts of their tradition. This, to me, is where true interreligious dialogue can take place.

However, this is a very complex task that the other Fellows and I have before us, not just in terms of being sensitive to each other's opinions, but also in breaking down the barriers that society has taught us to construct, barriers that prevent us from being truly honest about our perspectives. This fear of honesty and openness must be overcome in order for us to effectively discuss our experiences with our respective traditions, and, for me, this has been the most difficult part.

As someone who has a fear of mis-speaking or saying something untrue by mistake, I find it very difficult to contribute to some of the conversations. I want so desperately to share my perspectives on the various topics that we are discussing, but I find it intimidating, since the other Fellows seem so confident in their convictions. I often second-guess myself and question if what I have to say is valid or important, and through not being able to quickly get past my fear of honesty, I feel that I miss a lot of the important dialogue that happens in our group. I see how open the other Fellows are, and I'm striving to reach that level of comfort and confidence.

For example, I noticed that the last

meeting before we started our arts-based dialogue project was very significant for the others. I heard multiple other Fellows comment on how it was the first time that they felt like true dialogue was taking place and that everyone was completely open and honest during the discussions about the after-life. I was sad that I missed such an intriguing conversation. This was the one meeting that I had to leave early due to another commitment, and I'm extremely disappointed that I missed this important step for our group.

The second lesson that I've learned is how vastly different individuals within the same tradition can be. Being a Lutheran in an interdenominational Christian sorority, this isn't news to me. I have for many years understood how the different Christian denominations vary, but, as stated above, most of my previous knowledge of the other traditions has been based around background information rather than another's personal experiences.

I came prepared for the interfaith discussions because I have actively participated in interdenominational and interfaith groups before, and I have taken multiple religious studies classes. However, through our discussions, what has surprised me the most is how little I actually know about what constitutes someone as a faithful Jew or faithful Muslim. Having been so confident in my prior knowledge of the different Abrahamic religions, I never considered that people experience or relate to God or Allah in many different ways. I didn't consider that Jews and Muslims can vary just as much as Christians when it comes to theology.

I was naïve in thinking that my previous experiences completely prepared me for the demands of interreligious dialogue, but this group has helped reshape my approach in educating myself about the other faiths. I noticed that I have transformed from being focused on the textbook definitions of Judaism and Islam to seeking out explanations of others' perspectives as shaped by their identity of their tradition.

In addition to noticing how the two other traditions vary, I have also gained a better idea of the differences between me and the other Christians within our group. This was brought to my attention when we split into groups based on faith tradition to decide what central symbols we wanted to include in our group art project. As the other three girls and I discussed what symbols were important to Christianity, we discovered that we all had vastly different ideas of what we picture as symbolic of our faith. In the end, among the four of us, we were able to agree only on a cross, a shepherd's staff, and a dove as universal symbols of Christianity. For a group of people who share something so significant and meaningful with each other, it surprised me how differently we have experienced it.

That experience can be representative of the interreligious dialogue we attempt to foster as a Fellowship. As we struggled to find commonalities among ourselves, I started to understand how difficult it truly is to find commonalities with the other traditions. The commonalities I'm speaking of are not the background information or textbook definitions of each Abrahamic faith; rather, these commonalities are

in reference to *how* we experience our faith. Through having difficulties understanding why certain symbols are important to a fellow Christian, I finally realized the magnitude of what this Fellowship aims to accomplish.

This experience with determining our Christian symbols not only reaffirmed the complexity of interreligious dialogue, it also challenged me to define my faith in a concise and visual representation. When I began thinking of what symbolizes Christianity, I drew from the Bible and what one typically thinks of when hearing the words "Jesus" and "Christian." As we continued to talk, however, I realized that these cookie-cutter symbols aren't unique to my faith. I began to think of what I picture when I'm asked to reflect on my experiences as an ELCA Lutheran: vivid images of my home church and campus church, faces of people who have driven my faith forward, and instances where I've felt God's presence started to emerge in my mind. I was faced with the challenge of how to share it with others. I realized that all these images had one thing in common: hope. For me, hope is represented with the star that announced Jesus's birth.

This semester with the Fellows has opened my eyes to the complexity of interreligious dialogue through multiple facets and has made me challenge the ways that I view religion as a whole. Our discussions and projects have made me reconsider the complexity of sharing one's faith with a group of people, whether it is due to personal fears of opening up about one's religious perspectives or the difficulty of putting one's faith and experiences into words

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The times where I get the most out of the Institute is when the other students and I are able to converse about different practices and viewpoints of our religions.

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and other tangible expressions. This semester has definitely challenged me, confused me, and made me reevaluate

much of what I believed to be true—but through it all, it has me excited to see what the next semester brings.

SECOND REFLECTION

The point of the Lubar Fellows program is to gather Jewish, Christian, and Muslim students together and engage in a dialogue that is both informative and interesting. The times where I get the most out of the Institute is when the other students and I are able to converse about different practices and viewpoints of our religions. I enjoy discussing the similarities and realizing how much each tradition does have in common. However, I participate in this group to appreciate the other faiths and be made aware of the others' viewpoints.

A moment that was particularly impactful for me came from the Forum in December. During the large group discussion, the group began talking about holidays and time off from school. The Jewish students made a very powerful point: they wished that they had breaks over their holidays. It sounds like such a simple request, and it made me wonder how I have overlooked such a profound injustice for so many years. It never occurred to me that the entire educational system in America is based around not only the role of agriculture (which was more relevant in the past) but also the Christian calendar. I always knew that winter break included Christmas and, for the most part, spring break included Easter, but it never occurred to me that these seemingly arbitrary breaks in the

school calendar existed due to the presence of Christian holidays.

This insight greatly opened my eyes to the structural privilege I have as Christian, and how much more my faith has traditionally been held in higher regard than the others. Growing up in a white, predominately Christian, middle-class community, I knew this trend toward favoring Christianity existed politically, but I was blind to how significant the injustices were for those of other faiths. Thinking back to school, I often found it unfair for the Muslim students to be required to sit in the cafeteria during lunch over their days of fasting. I often sympathized with the temptation they must have felt; however, it never affected my personal worldview.

When hearing the Jewish students speak on the injustices of having to attend class during Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, or being unable to take time off from work on those days, I immediately became angry. I find it extremely unfair to expect the Jewish students at this university to keep up with class work or make up missed assignments by the next day when they're observing two very significant holidays in their faith. I feel as if this is the same as expecting Christian students to turn in a paper or take an exam on the day following Christmas. Where Christian students are typically given a week or a

month off around their significant holidays, Jewish students and employees seem to struggle to even get one day off.

Discussions such as this not only inform me of my privilege but also motivate me to somehow help change these aspects of our culture that are very much rooted in the Christian faith. Though I know it is nearly impossible at this point to alter the educational schedule, I do think that spreading awareness of other religions' holidays would be extremely effective. Informing employers and educators about overlooked religious holidays hopefully could be effective in reducing the frustration experienced by non-Christian students and employees while also promoting understanding of another faith's traditions. I understand that these are broad, generalized claims regarding how to "fix" this problem, but I do believe that the root of solving cultural issues is founded in education. The more this Christian normativity can be broken down, the more equality there can be for non-Christian religions.

Another very impactful moment I have had this winter was when our Fellows group attended the town hall discussion about the anti-Semitic actions of two freshmen in Sallery Hall. This event and experience also caused me to recognize my religious privilege. Though I've had less-than-ideal experiences with a few atheists, I've never felt personally victimized for my religion or my beliefs. Off the top of my head, I can't think of any hate crimes that have occurred toward Christians on the same scale as the Holocaust or even the Crusades. From a historical perspective, my tradition has typically been the

aggressor in many religious conflicts. Due to this, I have no idea what it feels like to have these events tied to the history of my faith or the significance that these events have on the following generations. I simply don't know what it feels like to be oppressed because of my fundamental beliefs.

As I stated before, I grew up in a predominantly Christian community. In my high school of 700 students, we had one Jewish family. Until recently, I didn't even know there was a synagogue besides Hillel downtown. I didn't have any personal connections to the Jewish community until I started my freshman year at UW-Madison, and even then I didn't have any understanding of the Jewish faith until I was a member of the Lubar Forum during my junior year.

From this (what I call) unintentional ignorance, I didn't understand how significant the Holocaust still is to the Jewish community. It sounds like a basic idea that's very obvious, but if you're not surrounded by survivors or family members of this global atrocity, it seems like it's just history.

I would have never made a joke about the Holocaust to my Jewish friends, but until I attended this town hall, I didn't realize how much this genocide continued to affect the Jewish community, especially since we live in the United States rather than Europe. Though it was under unfortunate circumstances caused by ignorance, I was glad that I could hear the statements from Jewish students around campus. Even though some of the Jewish Fellows felt that the community acted unfavorably or with a tone of victimization, I could sense the pain that this event had on some

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of those who attended the town hall. This experience with Lubar reminded me that the Holocaust didn't occur very long ago, and that the scars of terrible events like it permeate deep into future generations. We, as global citizens, need to be mindful of the histories of our neighbors' traditions and cultures.

In my first reflection for this year, I commented on how I felt unsure of how to put my experiences into words and how the Fellowship's pursuit of interreligious dialogue really challenged what I believed to be true. I explained how my eyes were opening to the variants within each tradition, as well as the variants of how each Fellow experienced their tradition. At first this confused me and made me feel that I wasn't knowledgeable about my faith,

but through constant exposure to new experiences, I have learned how to embrace this confusion. I have felt myself becoming a better listener of others as they explain their experiences while simultaneously feeling my mind opening to a broader worldview of how privileged I am for simply being a Christian.

Though most members of the privileged class may become defensive and uncomfortable while learning about the injustices of the minority classes, I look forward to learning how I can become a better advocate for religious and cultural equality. We have some important events planned for the remainder of the spring semester, and I'm excited to see what additional lessons can be made obvious to me.

THIRD REFLECTION

The last portion of the Lubar Fellowship has gone so quickly! From planning the Cherokee Middle School field trip, the time has flown by! This semester has not been what I expected, but it has been something completely unique and rewarding.

Our group gave mixed reviews for the interfaith field trip for Cherokee Middle School, but overall I believe that it was a positive experience for both the kids and for us! I really enjoyed the planning process of the whole thing because it gave me confidence in what I wanted to teach the students. I liked how the first round of our field trip was dedicated to each tradition individually, and that the second portion was focused on integrating the three. I espe-

cially loved how we taught the students about the intersection and overlap of prominent religious figures and shared values between the three Abrahamic traditions. Though we could have used a little more planning for the event, I think the stations were an overall success and kept the kids extremely engaged!

I think it was a good idea for the Christian station to host a "Jeopardy"-style game in order to teach the differences and the similarities between Catholicism and Protestantism. Prior to the field trip, the students had watched a video on the divisions of Christianity. It was great that we could tie our material back to the information for the video. That aspect made the station more

interactive for the students and solidified the information. I was thoroughly impressed at how much some of them knew about the different denominations of Christianity!

Overall, it was so much fun working with the students and teaching them about interfaith dialogue. I could tell that they were all genuinely interested in being there, whether the station I was running was their favorite or not. I loved the spontaneous questions that they asked me, and I loved the energy that they exhibited when participating in the activities. I was also very impressed with some of the questions they asked in a big group; it gave us, as Fellows, a chance to verbalize why interfaith dialogue is important and why religion itself is important. It makes me happy to know that these students are broadening their horizons and worldviews at such a young age. The validation from the parent chaperones helped me feel that I was making a difference in their education.

I know that the Fellows who could not attend this event felt disconnected from the group the whole month that we were planning it, and for that I am so sorry. It makes me think that we could have incorporated them better somehow to avoid these hurt feelings. I feel that if the new interfaith center wants to help host community learning events like this again, it should be more of a choice for the Fellows and they should host their meetings outside of the regular Fellowship meeting as to not exclude anyone. However, I do think that this type of outreach is important.

I think that the new interfaith center should host community events like

this in the future. We spend so much time talking about interfaith dialogue, and I found it so rewarding to take what we have learned from each other and tell other people! By hosting more public events, like movies, workshops, speakers, and even middle-school field trips, we can have a much bigger impact on our campus. Maybe the new center can have a group that meets to discuss interfaith topics, while another group works to host events around campus and the greater Madison area. I think this group has a wonderful platform that can be used for great community improvement!

This year with the Lubar Fellows has not been exactly what I expected. I came into the group expecting to meet once a week, talk about our topic, and then go on with our individual schedules. However, this could not be further from the truth! At first we were a little shy around one another, but toward the end of first semester, I started to notice that we were all becoming friends, which made me so happy! I am so overjoyed that I now have an interfaith community where I can ask questions without being perceived as ignorant or uneducated with people who are more than willing to answer them.

Coming to our weekly meetings has quickly become one of my favorite parts of my week, and the other fellows never cease to bring a smile to my face! I have appreciated the dedication that we have shown to each other in supporting each other's additional student organizations on campus or simply lending a helping hand when needed. I feel that God/Allah is extremely happy seeing His children building such nice friend-

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ships while striving to reach a better understanding of Him through each other.

I did value all of the activities that we did this academic year, but I do wish that we had had more time to discuss our interfaith topics as we had planned. Through everything, I did miss having the opportunity to share my faith experiences with the other Fellows, and I definitely missed hearing about their faith traditions, since our time was dedicated to planning the field trip. However, the last discussion, when we talked about what we liked and disliked about our religious affiliations, was wonderful, and I really valued hearing the passion in everyone's voice. I know this year was full of changes for the Lubar Institute, from losing funding to gaining a new name and identity, and I am happy that I got to experience it with such a positive and proactive group of people!

The program has definitely made a lasting impression on me, and I now strive to incorporate this type of work into my career. I made the decision last

spring to pursue a career in Christian Marriage and Family Therapy and attend seminary in St. Paul, Minnesota this coming fall. However, through my time as a Lubar Fellow, I have decided that I want to not only be a Christian Marriage and Family Therapist, but I would also like to specialize in families or couples experiencing interfaith conflict. Additionally, I strive to host interfaith workshops between religious leaders and their congregations in whatever community I am placed in, since I will have the platform to do so. I am extremely excited to pursue a career like this, especially since I feel that it fits me perfectly, and I owe it all to the Lubar Institute.

I want to offer a big thank you to the Lubar Institute for making such a lasting impression on me these last two years. I have learned so much about not only the other Abrahamic faiths, but also about my faith and my calling in life. I will be forever grateful for everything Lubar has given me and the friendships that have come from it! ●

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The Lubar Institute for the Study of the Abrahamic Religions

opened in July, 2005, testament to the vision and benefactions of Sheldon and Marianne Lubar of Milwaukee, Wisconsin. Concerned about rising religious tensions worldwide and believing Jews, Christians and Muslims to be capable of prolonged and honest inquiry into their common heritages and varying perspectives, they imagined a center that would advance mutual comprehension by mingling scholars with the general public, clergy with laity, and members of different faith communities with the citizens of Wisconsin, the United States, and the world. Through encouraging people belonging to and/or interested in the Abrahamic traditions to engage each other and to find out more about them and their intersections, the Lubar Institute is dedicated to strengthening the values of religious pluralism so vital for sustaining American civil society and peaceful international discourse.

The Institute's mission—to create better understanding of the Abrahamic traditions and their interrelationships by encouraging ongoing discussion of these traditions among scholars, members of those traditions, and the general public—emerges from the intimate yet often bitter relations that have historically existed between Jews, Christians, and Muslims. Recognizing that the Abrahamic traditions share common origins and values, that their history has been deeply intertwined for some 1300 years, that much current popular as well as scholarly thinking tends to view them in isolation or as being antagonistic to each other, and that the legacy of misunderstanding and mistrust militates against peaceful discourse between Jews, Christians, and Muslims, the Institute seeks to cultivate greater understanding of these traditions and their relationships by encouraging ongoing discussion of these traditions among scholars, students, members of those traditions, and the general public—whatever their religious commitments may (or may not) be.

The Lubar Institute carries out its mission first by running scholarly programs such as conferences, symposia, lectures, and exhibitions, often in interdisciplinary collaboration with academic units across the humanities, social sciences, and even natural sciences. It then fashions practical outlets for this knowledge through on-campus activities, such as the Interfaith Student Fellows and the Interfaith Student Forum, as well as community-oriented events. The increasing awareness among educators about the importance of pairing classroom and co-curricular learning, combined with the University's recognition that religious identity plays an important role in how many students define themselves, has led the Institute to embrace a corollary mission: to increase religious literacy and tolerance among all members of the UW–Madison campus. The merger of scholarly and practical activity exemplifies the Wisconsin Idea. First articulated by University President Charles Van Hise one hundred years ago, the Wisconsin Idea can be stated in twenty-first century terms as “the dedicated application of scholarship and teaching to public service.” By educating people about the braided histories of the Abrahamic religions and bringing different groups of people together for candid conversations about religious difference, the Institute strives to fulfill this ideal by reducing religious conflict and thereby thickening the bonds of American civil society.



The Lubar Institute for the Study of the Abrahamic Religions

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