

Class trip to a mosque

I wanted to introduce my students to Muslims, not just to Islam.

by [Debra Dean Murphy](#) in the [January 2, 2019](#) issue



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It's always a challenge introducing Islam to undergraduates. I am out of my depth with the subject matter, and our cultural moment is inimical to nuance. But the stakes seemed even higher this time, amid travel bans and fearmongering. So I didn't want simply to introduce my students to Islam; I wanted to introduce them to Muslims.

Our host greets us outside the mosque on a bright, brisk day in late autumn. He and I have only exchanged emails, so it is good now to put his kind face to a name I have typed many times. I and several women in the class have hastily donned head scarves in the stiff breeze. All 30 of us are ushered up the steps and into the building. We remove our shoes. We are glad for the warm socks we knew to put on this morning.

They say you never really learn something until you teach it. I know this to be true in ways both humiliating and humbling. I didn't sign on to teach other religions back when I began graduate study in Christian theology and liturgy. But neither did I know then that higher education would face enormous pressures from shrinking enrollments, revenue shortfalls, and downsized departments.

The students and I sit cross-legged on plush carpet at the back of the prayer hall. We face the mihrab, a niche in the wall that indicates the direction of Mecca. A young man opens a window and chants the call to prayer out onto the street below, his resonant baritone amplified by a sound system. This is a university town with many devout Muslims in professions like engineering and medicine. This is also Appalachia. My students and I ponder that and many other things in this moment.

It looks manageable on a syllabus: the subjects we'll cover, the books and films we'll study, the projects students will complete. But they will need competent guidance, and that task—to my discomfort and dread each semester—falls to me. I always come clean early on about my lack of expertise. This is tricky. Someone has paid a good deal of money for a student to sit in my classroom. Someone could wonder if they are getting their money's worth.

In the silence after the call to prayer, a few men enter the hall and take their places close together in a straight line. In this mosque, the women pray from the balcony directly above us and out of our sight. We don't know if there are any women present today. If so, we wish we could see them, talk to them, ask them questions. The imam enters and soon begins leading Zuhr, the prayer after midday. We observe what I have prepared my students to expect: verses of the Qur'an recited with a repetitive choreography of bowing, bending, kneeling, and full prostration. We have talked about this, about how different it is from the hurried half-prayers we might utter ourselves, by ourselves, if we happen to think of it, if we pray at all.

I want my students to know that even if I lack the training to teach this course with confidence, I do have a deep admiration for its subject matter—and that sometimes a curious, well-read outsider can nurture their own curiosity in ways a specialist cannot. Or maybe I'm trying to talk myself into believing this. I do know that what is taught in a classroom is not simply what the teacher knows, but how she has come to know it and the difference this knowing makes. I learned this insight years ago from philosopher-ethicist Jean Bethke Elshtain, but its full power wasn't evident until I found myself regularly taking students to synagogues, mosques, Buddhist temples,

and Hindu *mandirs* and arranging classroom visits like the recent one from three lovely practitioners of Krishna consciousness, who performed *kirtan* and brought us homemade cookies.

I also believe that whether I am leading a discussion about Siddhartha Gautama or Dorothy Day, failure is an inescapable part of the process. The very nature of the teaching and learning enterprise—instructing, listening, comprehension, conversation—is inevitably partial and incomplete. A teacher can never say all that can be said; students can never hear all that should be heard. But this kind of failure is morally instructive: it reveals that education is less about mastery of some predetermined content (and of the instruments deemed necessary to measure this) and more about the kind of humility required to be a lifelong seeker of truth. And truth too is always partial, glimpsed rather than grasped, evident more by its fleetingness than its fullness—since the fissures and gaps are where genuine learning finds a foothold.

When the prayer is done, our host and the imam join us on the carpet for 90 minutes of conversation. They answer our questions honestly and thoroughly. With disarming humor, they dispel a host of tired stereotypes. I am struck by an unfamiliar dynamic: receiving hospitality from strangers. Along with the gifts of their time and patience, they offer each of us as we leave a brown bag filled with fruit, chips, chocolate, and a cold drink. This is a little decentering, since most of us are more comfortable in settings where we extend hospitality rather than receive it. It is also deeply humbling.

There are things my students remain puzzled and perplexed by, practices they (and I) don't completely understand. But in our shared unknowing I am newly confident that on this bright, brisk day we are all learning something of what it means to learn. And I, at least, am discovering again the gift of vulnerability.

A version of this article appears in the print edition under the title "Lessons at a mosque."