From the Office of University Chaplain

“Vocation does not come from willfulness. It comes from listening. I must listen to my life and try to understand what it is truly about—quite apart from what I would like it to be about—or my life will never represent anything real in the world, no matter how earnest my intentions. That insight is hidden in the word vocation itself, which is rooted in the Latin for ‘voice.’ Vocation does not mean a goal that I pursue. It means a calling that I hear. Before I can tell my life what I want to do with it, I must listen to my life telling me who I am. I must listen for the truths and values at the heart of my own identity, not the standards by which I must live—but the standards by which I cannot help but live if I am living my own life.” – Parker J. Palmer in *Let Your Life Speak*

Interfaith work is about a lot of things: peace and justice, community and friendship, conversation and action. It’s wonderfully communal work that takes place over late afternoon sweets and long evening dinners, while digging in the dirt in city gardens and chopping onions at soup kitchens, when observing and participating in the shared—and distinctive—prayers of our neighbors and friends. It’s also deeply personal work that requires a willingness to, as Palmer above suggests, listen to our lives and understand what they are truly about. Seeking to understand another’s faith invites deeper reflection about one’s own—and when this invitation is accepted, amazing, difficult, transforming things often happen. Categories of belief or non-belief shift. Frameworks become more complicated. New questions emerge, and new commitments surface. And, at its best, all of this reflection, born of listening “for the truths and values at the heart” of our own identities, becomes a passionate calling for those committed to an authentic life lived on one’s own, in community, and for the common good.

That’s, at least, how I have experienced interfaith work and the reflections of the students who have written for this inaugural Illinois Wesleyan University Interfaith Journal. These pages contain the offerings of young women and men for whom interfaith work and service have become vehicles for living out their deepest held values and for exploring and listening to who they are, what they believe, and how they want to live. May this journal, born of the passion and vision of Multifaith Ambassador Mark Timmerman, inspire others on our campus to ask and live the good and difficult, urgent and transforming questions that come with interfaith work. And may this work continue to contribute to peace and justice, community and friendship, and authentic understandings of one another and our deepest selves.

Elyse Nelson Winger
University Chaplain
Illinois Wesleyan University

Special thanks to Multifaith Ambassador Aaron Woodstein for creating and then painting this tree of life symbol for this Interfaith Journal.
Since my mother’s side of the family is Christian and my father’s side of the family is Jewish, I have encountered many interfaith experiences throughout my life. These experiences have shaped my religious identity and have inspired my interest in interfaith work. Although I was raised Jewish, I have always attended some Christian services with my grandparents and the rest of my Christian family members. At first, I felt uncomfortable with the language and concepts brought up throughout the service. I tuned out parts of the sermon that I thought would conflict with my own beliefs. As I grew older, however, I realized that I should pay more attention to this faith and its traditions, since many of my friends and half of my family were Christian, and I considered them all to be truly good people whom I loved. Now, when I attend Christian services, I quiet the voice inside my head that tells me that Judaism is superior, and I try to listen and truly understand the Christian perspective. I have come to realize that although I fundamentally disagree with certain aspects of Christianity, many parts are beautiful, and overall, I can understand why many of my friends and family members have a passion for their Christian faith. I am continually working to maintain an open and accepting mind toward the Christian faith and other faiths different from my own.

I also grew to understand the other side of this experience, in which I became more aware of how others view my faith. This occurred when I watched the Christian side of my family seek to understand Judaism. An example of this experience was during my younger sister’s Bat Mitzvah, when I sat next to my Christian grandparents. Since I am accustomed to the people around me singing and chanting enthusiastically to the songs and chants in the service, my grandparents’ understandable silence felt different to me. I began to view the service through their eyes, and I became more aware of the meaning of the prayers I had memorized and thoughtlessly recited countless times. I realized there were certain aspects of the service that I did not care for, including the parts that emphasized Judaism’s superiority over other faiths and the parts that included an abundance of Hebrew and little attention to the English translation. This experience with my grandparents gave me a new insight into my own religious practices, and I was able to see that there are aspects of all faiths, including my own, that I do not like, but that does not make those faiths any less viable.

Another way in which I experienced the relationship between Judaism and Christianity growing up was through my experience at school. As one of less than ten practicing Jewish students at my high school of approximately 3000, I understand the impact that being a religious minority has on the way in which I express my faith, especially in relation to the majority faith. Even though I did not face any incidents involving obvious anti-Semitism, I faced some challenges as a religious minority. The most common challenge was when my role as a Jew conflicted with my role as a student. There was always a test on Rosh Hashanah or Yom Kippur, when I would be absent to attend services; marching band required that I attend football games on Friday nights on the Jewish Sabbath. Both students and teachers frequently questioned my absences from these events. Another challenge that I faced involved discussion among my friends. We generally did not talk about religion, and when we did, it was very superficial and typically involved a rapid change of subject. I think that we were afraid that our
One of my favorite aspects of my faith is the call for tikkun olam, or “repairing the world.” Tikkun olam has been a major way in which I live out my faith; I try to remember it when making day-to-day choices as well as major life decisions. I like the idea of tikkun olam because it forces me to consider my actions as part of a greater whole and to remember that at the end of my life, I want to have made a positive difference in the world.

Jennifer Altman

Illinois Wesleyan
Interfaith Journal
It is essential for the betterment of the world that everyone critically considers his or her own beliefs. This critical thought prevents the ignorance that perpetuates prejudice and intolerance. Interfaith work provides an excellent setting to listen to others’ religious or non-religious perspectives and critically consider one’s own thoughts while also learning about diverse cultural traditions and worldviews.

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better through exploring and embracing the overlapping values between their faith and non-faith traditions.

While acknowledging similarities is a great way to bring people of different faiths together and create change, it is only the start of interfaith engagement. I have learned through my experience with my friends and family that avoiding discussion of differences between our faiths only builds more tension over time. Embracing these differences is not easy, but it is much more satisfying and can help build a stronger bond. Every week at Evelyn Chapel, we host an interfaith discussion called ReligiosiTEA, in which we each bring our unique faith or non-faith perspectives together to discuss a specific topic or issue. I try to come in every week having thought through my own opinions on the topic as well as the “official” Reform Judaism stance, if it differs from my own. Sometimes, my thoughts on the subject change during ReligiosiTEA by listening to others’ perspectives. I think that is one of the greatest aspects of interfaith engagement: it leads people to question their own thoughts and beliefs. It is possible to remain rooted in one’s convictions without ever questioning them, but it is essential for the betterment of the world that everyone critically considers his or her own beliefs. This critical thought prevents the ignorance that perpetuates prejudice and intolerance. Interfaith work provides an excellent setting to listen to others’ religious or non-religious perspectives and critically consider one’s own thoughts while also learning about diverse cultural traditions and worldviews.

I have learned so much about interfaith work through my experiences growing up and through my work at Illinois Wesleyan, but I know that my future interfaith engagement will bring even more challenges and benefits to my life. It is so important to engage in interfaith conversation and activism because it can lead to positive change throughout the world as well as a decrease in religious intolerance. As a religious minority, I have found that I feel more comfortable on campus now that I am more involved in interfaith work because I know that there are people on campus who are genuinely interested in and open to faiths and perspectives that are different from their own. I hope that interfaith engagement will become more widespread because even though it can be challenging, it can also lead to a more peaceful and open individual, community, and world.

J.A.
When I was little I remember asking my dad why we can hear the wind if we cannot see it or feel it. He explained we cannot see wind because wind is just moving air and we can only hear the wind because of the way it affects our eardrums. He said, “The sound the wind makes when it howls through your ears is a sound only you can hear. No one else hears the wind the same way you do because no one else has the same shaped ears as you.”

This is my philosophy when I approach interfaith work and conversations. Everyone has different ears and is affected differently by the same situation, and listening to his or her perspective is important in order to understand how he or she views the world.

I grew up in a religious household and attended church every Sunday, but I never felt connected to a God. During high school I wanted to better understand my own faith and started going to a church on my own. It was a church that had a large youth program, modern services, and youth groups. When we were having a discussion about faith I asked my group how they knew there was a God who listens to their prayers. They told me there is no way to prove that God exists, but they have faith that He does. I simply do not have that faith.

I can sit next to my friends in the same services hearing the same words and the same songs, but they do not resonate with me in a way that leads me to believe a God exists, but they have faith that He does. I simply do not have that faith.

I believe it is my consciousness and ability to understand the varying experiences
of other individuals which gives me the desire to understand them further. One way I achieve this is through interfaith discussion. People’s religious and non-religious beliefs have a large impact on their perception of the world and their role in it. By having these conversations, I feel that I leave with more knowledge of the reasoning behind differing opinions. This does not mean that I enter these discussions viewing people solely as their identified faith, but rather that I listen to them and discuss how their faith tradition as well as other experiences have shaped their perceptions.

When I first became a Multifaith Ambassador I questioned my role as a non-religious person in an interfaith movement. “Inter” means between or among and “faith” is a complete trust and is most commonly used in a religious context. So where do I, someone who lacks faith, belong in a movement between and among people who have faith? I believe the goal of interfaith work is to create common experiences and to understand the individuality of perspectives on those experiences in light of beliefs. This means that every perspective is welcome to the conversation. For me, listening to other people discuss their differing faiths has made me question and better understand my opinions and how they have been shaped.

As part of understanding my role in the interfaith movement, I read the book *Faitheist* by Christopher Stedman, a humanist Chaplain at Yale. Chris walks through his life experiences beginning by growing up in a non-religious household, his fascination and involvement in religion, his later rejection and contempt for religion, and then his identification as a humanist and his involvement in the interfaith movement. Although I do not identify as a Humanist, my beliefs align with many of the opinions expressed by Chris in his book. I found reading *Faitheist* to be a window into understanding the opinions of a person similar to myself and an experience that helped give me the vocabulary to express my desire to become a Multifaith Ambassador.

Everyone hears the wind a little bit differently, and it is important we understand what shapes the individuality of perceptions of our shared experiences.

*T.K.*

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**Anna Kerr-Carpenter ’17**

“The sound the wind makes when it howls through your ears is a sound only you can hear. No one else hears the wind the same way you do because no one else has the same shaped ears as you.”

This is my philosophy when I approach interfaith work and conversations. Everyone has different ears and is affected differently by the same situation, and listening to his or her perspective is important in order to understand how he or she views the world.
Some kids are told: don't bring up religion or politics. At least I was. I didn't fully grasp the significance of this as a six-year-old Jewish boy until I had my first interfaith encounter. I was talking with a nice, pretty girl from my class and she asked me what church I attended. I told her that I was Jewish. She simply replied, "You are going to hell." As a six-year-old that really shocked me, so I exclaimed, "No I'm not! I do good things." Right before she walked away she explained, "Since you don't believe in Jesus, you are going to hell." That was the last time I talked about religion with anyone outside of my faith until I was well into high school.

My spiritual journey in high school is another story altogether. The first girl I dated was an Orthodox Jew. While this didn't make me feel all that different at the time, my being a Conservative—as opposed to Orthodox Jew—didn't seem to please her parents. The fact that I was Agnostic on top of that pretty much ended the relationship for me right there. Besides my Bar Mitzvah, which is a coming of age religious ceremony in which one reads directly from the Torah, that six-year old girl's proclamation was my only major religious encounter. It took until my sophomore year of college for my return to faith to begin.

I took up a job as a Multicultural Educator, which concentrated on race, religion, and other cultural barriers. For two of my office hours I had the choice to sit in the Multicultural Center working on homework, or working at the Chapel. Not liking to be idle, I took up work at the chapel. Soon I was thrown headlong into planning an event and the opportunity to share my faith with others. At the time, we were planning the first annual "Light The Night." This event was created to celebrate the common ties that many religious and spiritual groups have with the symbol of light in the dark, cold winter. When we began to discuss Chanukah, I mentioned that I was in an a cappella group. It was then that we determined that I would ask to share a bit of my heritage through song. Without realizing it, I began a first of many interfaith encounters in association with the Chapel. I began to teach my group a bit of Hebrew along with some traditional Jewish melodies. I found a newfound joy in sharing bits of my culture with my classmates.

I ended up leaving my job as a Multicultural educator, but that didn't stop me from continuing to come to ReligiosiTEA. It wasn't long before our Chaplain Elyse asked me to become a Multifaith Ambassador. This work brought me into many different projects. Along with the next annual Light the Night, I also began using Theatre in my work at the Chapel. We had a "Banned Books for Religious Reasons" event and my classmate Hannah decided to direct a scene from To Kill A Mockingbird. I picked my personal favorite banned book, Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets. I used my sound-design skills to craft the show, and it was amazing to apply what I was learning into my multifaith work.

Looking towards the future, there is more to come in my interfaith journey. I plan to put on a Hell program focused around No Exit, the play that originated the quote "hell is other people." There will be an Interfaith Coffee House, and I will be able to use my connections in the music school to contribute as much entertainment and cultural variety as I can. The most challenging interfaith experience I will likely have will be my wedding. While this isn't in the near future, I have begun to think about how to have a ceremony that would satisfy my needs while being mindful of his. That day is not soon coming, but being in love with an Atheist has been my favorite interfaith encounter to date. In the end, my love is reserved for anyone who is committed to human service, and who strives always to learn and share knowledge.

A.W.
Reflections on Chicago: An Interfaith Engagement and Service Trip
Elyse Nelson Winger

“Is that it?” We stood across the street from a single-story building, its low-slung roof dark and damp like the morning that enveloped us. After an hour driving expressways and unfamiliar city streets, we hoped that the light illuminating the drawn window blinds signaled life. We crossed the street… I opened the door…and there was life indeed. Women dressed in warm and flowing hues arose and individually embraced all twenty-one of us, greetings of salaam reverberating throughout the small, but gracious, space.

Men, too, offered words of welcome and our once gray, dislocated day brightened as we received the gift of hospitality from strangers delighted to offer us food and drink and a glimpse of their faithful life together. For the next two hours, we—students and staff of various ethnicities, nationalities, faith, and non-faith traditions from Illinois Wesleyan University, beginning a weekend of Interfaith Engagement and Service—were treated as honored guests of this Muslim community on Chicago’s far south side.

We listened to the imam’s personal story of faith and confidence about God’s love for all people across traditions and cultures. We imagined the experience of hajj, or pilgrimage, to Mecca where Muslims from around the world, of all racial and socio-economic backgrounds, attest to the unity and equality of humanity before God. We observed Jum’ah, or Friday, prayer as beautifully-chanted Arabic echoed around us. And we learned that the story of Abraham’s welcome of “or people unknown” in the Qur’an inspired their own:

Has there reached you the story of the honored guests of Abraham? When they entered upon him and said, “[We greet you with] peace.” He answered, “[And upon you] peace, [you are] a people unknown. Then he went to his family and came with a fat [roasted] calf and placed it near them; he said, “Will you not eat?” [Surat adh-Dhariyat: 24-27]

This wasn’t the first time we’d pondered holy hospitality that day. Earlier that morning, we had prepared for this visit at the Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago’s Center of Christian-Muslim Engagement for Peace and Justice where Abraham and Sarah’s hospitality was invoked as a Christian call for interfaith engagement and understanding: “Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it” (Hebrews 13:2). Some of us were familiar with this text, even seeing it as central to our own interfaith interests and commitments. But today was different. Today, we were the strangers, humbled and heartened by a caring community seeking to live out its faith. Today, those of us who embraced Christian interpretations of this text would newly know that this sacred story of hospitality was not ours to own.

Hours later, we found ourselves on a new street corner, standing across from a historic, Byzantine-style synagogue enshrouded in early evening darkness and banked by concrete barriers and a black SUV. We knew the reason for the security measures: President Obama’s home was across the adjacent street. But the absence of light coming from the stained glass windows confused us. Was this it?

We crossed the street and soon a couple, checking on the temple garden, noticed our confusion and welcomed us in. We followed the rows of vegetable plants encircling the grand, brick structure and soon found ourselves in a contemporary building warmly lit and embodied by people preparing to celebrate Shabbat. Greetings of shalom filled the gathering space leading into the sanctuary and words of welcome from the rabbi ushered us into an evening of sacred, set-apart time with this Jewish community that exuded care and concern for one another and for their guests.

We watched as Sabbath candles were lit and a cup was blessed. We listened as Hebrew poetry and prayers were sung and spoken. We
Reflections on Chicago: An Interfaith Engagement and Service Trip continued

Elyse Nelson Winger

witnessed the procession and unrolling of the temple scroll and tuned our ears to the cantor’s lyrical singing and the rabbi’s reflection. With wit and wisdom, the rabbi engaged the evening’s vast Torah portion from the Book of Genesis, calling our attention to the divine mandate for hospitality—by way of its violent opposite.

Like Abraham and Sarah under the oaks at Mamre, Lot, sitting at the gates of Sodom, has also offered hospitality to strangers: a place to wash their feet, eat a meal, and rest awhile. And then chaos ensues, for... “before they lay down, the men of the city, the men of Sodom, both young and old, all the people to the last man, surrounded the house; and they called to Lot, ‘Where are the men who came to you tonight? Bring them out to us, so that we may know them’” (Genesis 19:4-5). From there the horrific threat of sexual violence ensues for men and young women alike, designed to degrade the strangers and humiliate the hosts. Sodom’s sin was grievous, life-destroying and demeaning inhospitality. But, God’s call is its gracious, life-giving and restoring opposite.

And as the rabbi continued his reflection and the Torah was reverently returned to the Ark, as prayers of celebration and concern were offered up by the congregation and then a time of sweets and fellowship brought this sacred time to a close, I marveled at the joyful irony of our day. From Christian classroom to Muslim community center to Jewish temple, ancient stories of hospitality had sprung from the page of the New Testament, Qur’an, and Torah and were opening hearts and minds of students from various religious traditions—or pointedly no religion at all—to the “other” and to one another as well. They were living anew in me, too.

I had forgotten what it was like to be the stranger—and how dignifying it is to be invited to experience and understand another tradition while living authentically out of my own. And I wondered: How well do I do this in my own faith community? And what might it mean for interfaith friendships and witness if we were to love and welcome the strangers in our own community, sharing our faith, honoring their own?

From Christian classroom to Muslim community center to Jewish temple, ancient stories of hospitality had sprung from the page of the New Testament, Qur’an, and Torah and were opening hearts and minds of students from various religious traditions—or pointedly no religion at all—to the “other” and to one another as well. They were living anew in me, too.

This article was originally published in Gather Magazine.
Faith – an unconditional trust in something. I find it in the overwhelming moments that are filled with such profound joy, peace, and love that I have no words to describe it. It is personal, and something that cannot ever be fully understood.

Interfaith – the act of sharing personal beliefs while listening, accepting and caring about what others’ beliefs consist of. It is open; it is brave. Interfaith has been and will forever be stitched into my outlook on life. I have always been interested in other people’s beliefs because it can shape everything about them. My freshman year before I was a Multifaith Ambassador, I took a class called Chinese Religions with the wonderful Professor Tao Jin. Within all that we learned, the one idea that stuck with me is that everything can be nothing; but, in the same time, nothing can be everything. How I understand it (which might not be the way it is meant) is that my outlook on life is what life becomes, not necessarily what others’ outlooks say it is. One day Professor Jin was speaking at the “First Wednesday Chapel,” which is an event hosted by the Chapel to engage various topics in religion and spirituality. I was intrigued by what we had learned in class and wanted to know more, so I decided to go. After his talk, there was a lunch and I asked him about his beliefs. He told me that he actually did not believe in a God. But, he appreciated these religions so much that he studies and teaches them. He still loves these belief systems and it is a part of who he is even though he does not believe himself. When I first became a Multifaith Ambassador as a sophomore this year, Professor Jin’s teaching helped me to see that I can easily love all religions just the same and still hold my Christian faith. It is what I decide to accept and cherish that becomes everything. Other religious teachings are very much a part of who I am even though I am a Christian, and it is okay that not every question that comes about because of it is answerable.

I've learned that’s what makes God more mysterious and more beautiful than I can fathom. Professor Jin summed it up pretty well; as he was answering my question he pulled out a small paper religious symbol from his wallet and proceeded to say “just in case.”

My position as a Multifaith Ambassador has become more than a job or even a hobby, but a way of life. Interfaith is a part of my every day discussion with the people I encounter. And, in an incredible way, I have grown in my own religion because of it. Growing up, I went to Catholic Mass every weekend and attended Religious Education every week. In high school, however, my dad sent my sister and I on this youth retreat. I found out on the weekend that it was through the Episcopal Diocese of Chicago, the same group my dad was a part of as a kid. These people were different than what I was used to in mass. We jumped around when we sang; there were women as priests, priests had children, and they could even be gay. I became very involved in the Episcopal Church where I learned to love and accept everyone no matter who they are. But, I was not able to fully care for the people who did not accept everyone as readily as I did. After I became a Multifaith Ambassador, I was forced to address the hard and challenging questions: If I don’t agree with some beliefs that other Christians hold, does that make me less Christian? I realized that even if my Catholic family and my old church did not believe in accepting other religions or certain sexual preferences, I cannot be angry with them for it. The Catholic faith is so strong, traditional, and
Nicole Chlebek

beautiful that I could never demean them to holding to what they know to be true. It is their faith. In interfaith, I have learned to love the tension that comes about when people of various beliefs learn from each other, disagree, but accept each other for the beliefs they hold. I’ve become someone who desires for the moments when beliefs clash because that is when the real interfaith work begins. It is one of the hardest but also most rewarding things in the world to learn how to accept someone for their belief system when it is so far off from your own.

One of the most rewarding aspects of this year as a Multifaith Ambassador was when I had the pleasure of creating and planning the event called Green Spirituality. I wanted to provide an event that gave a different perspective on interfaith while combining my passions for people and the environment. I put together a panel of individuals to discuss their personal story about how their different beliefs affect their perspectives on nature and the environment. Our chaplain Elyse, one of our incredible Multifaith Ambassadors Tess, a beloved professor Dr. Jahiel, and I all shared such wonderful and personal stories from varying perspectives: Christian, non-religious, Jewish. It was one of the most rewarding experiences because it didn’t matter whether you were a student, a staff, or faculty, or even what belief system you had – we shared raw and tangible stories of our love for the environment through our various lenses on life. The simple act of sharing passions allowed me and the entire audience to connect with each individual speaking, so that they could understand more than just another spiritual perspective, but also the passion that lies behind it.

The Multifaith Ambassador program is not only a place I go to work but a place I now call home. The people I work with I consider family. I can share my heart with them and they the same with me. They challenge me intellectually, and teach me compassion and understanding every day we work together. They uphold the truth in Wesleyan’s tradition to do well in the world, but more importantly to do good. Without this year I would have never addressed the hard questions and explored the mysteries of faith. With each interfaith conversation I had, I was able to strengthen my own faith perspective. I had to learn how to say what I truly believed while questioning my roots from childhood. I would not have become the person I am proud to be today without the beautiful work we did in the basement of the chapel. Every time we circled-up to discuss, brainstorm, and learn, we shared an environment of unconditional love and respect with each other. I feel God present in the work we do. This year has set me on a journey for the rest of my life. The beauty of belief and sharing belief is something I will cherish forever. I’ve learned that each one of us, even if we share the same exact religion, still holds their own individual faith and perspective different from anyone else. Each individual brings their own molded and formed beliefs to the table. Each individual belief is unique. Each one of us sees the vastness of this world in a different light – the magnificence of it all is listening and watching each of our worlds connect.

N.C.
Reflections on ReligiosiTEA
Carly Floyd and Anna Kerr-Carpenter

The discussion that stands out most in my memory was the one on women in religion. How our different traditions conceptualize the place of half of society in religious matters is of great interest to me. Coming out of a pagan perspective, and as a woman myself, my notions of women’s roles in sacred matters is quite different from other religions. This is largely due to the unique nature of what my tradition considers sacred.

“Pagan” is an umbrella term for a large variety of diverse spiritualities, arising from different cultures in different parts of the world. But a unifying theme for most, if not all, pagan beliefs is the importance placed on the earth. The earth is regarded as a mother – she supports us in every way. She sustains vegetation and animals which feed us, she gives us fresh water, she provides resources from which we make shelter, tools, clothing, and all else that we need. From her come all kinds of life and greenery. Because the earth gives us gifts of life and things which sustain us, a connection is made to women, who also have the power to give life and nurture. For this reason, women are often exalted over men in pagan traditions, and held as sacred, powerful beings.

It is therefore interesting to compare some of the values and virtues found in other religions, and how those translate into how women are perceived. In many of the other major world religions, such as Christianity and Islam, divinity is conceptualized as male. Men are given a lot of autonomy in historical religious text, and women are presented as a gift for man. While women are often perceived favorably, as caretakers and virtuous supporters, they are nonetheless given an inferior role in religious matters, and spiritual duty is to defer to their fathers, brothers, husbands, or other male relatives. This system is opposite the hierarchy found in Wicca and other pagan religions, where the Goddess is considered above the God, her consort, and the majority of spiritual leaders are women.

The exalted status of Mary in Catholic Christian tradition was an interesting topic that came up during this particular ReligiosiTEA discussion. She is elevated to what could be objectively considered a comparable “Goddess” status, but the reasons for her glorification are quite different to why pagans glorify women. In Christianity, Mary is seen as the perfect woman: she is devoted to God, putting His plan above her own and following His wishes, and she preserves her virtues. Even though she is a mother, she has remained pure and virginal. In my tradition, women are inherently sacred, and their glorification is not derived from association with God or deference. Also, what is in my opinion most interesting is the difference in sacred charge regarding sexuality. The Virgin Mary is sacred because she has remained pure, a Christian virtue. In my tradition, remaining chaste is not a necessity. Safe and responsible sexuality is held as sacred, because it is that sexuality which allows for life and exhibits life-giving fertility.

This particular discussion really reflected some unique aspects of my pagan tradition, in that it lifts up women in status and power and the stigma relating to expressive sexuality present in other religions does not exist in mine. As a woman and a feminist, it gives me hope that the trend in other religions toward recognizing equality of the sexes in religious matters will continue, and that women will be able to participate fully alongside men in any religion they choose.

C.F.
Reflections on ReligiosiTEA
Carly Floyd and Anna Kerr-Carpenter

What do your religious, non-religious, or spiritual beliefs say about animals and animal rights in the hierarchy of life?

The recent topic of animal rights that we discussed in ReligiosiTEA has been—and will continue to be—an imperative issue in my life. I have been a vegetarian for roughly two and a half years. My decision, though largely influenced in the beginning by a high school need to experiment and find my individuality, has become a growing spiritual commitment. In fact, it wasn’t until our discussion that I was finally able to put into words what being a vegetarian means to me. I am a vegetarian to demonstrate that I do not hold a superiority complex over animals, which is a prevalent facet of our society. My faith reminds me that God creates all creatures in the image of Himself and all are humble before his presence. As a commitment to this notion, being a vegetarian reminds me to stay humble and love God’s creatures as I love others. Genesis 1:26 reads: “God said, ‘Let us make man in our image, after our likeness. And let them have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over the livestock and over all the earth and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth.’” It is easy to see how humans learned to abuse their “power” over animals, believing themselves to be the outwardly more intelligent creatures. However, God gave us this power to protect and serve the other species God created so they would in turn serve us. It is not a gift of superiority, but the gift of an equal, giving relationship. Somewhere along the way, this became a one-sided relationship and animal-associated industries, especially the food industry, mass produce food essentially by stealing from and needlessly abusing thousands of animals in their pursuit. We have become a society in the desperate hunt to assert power over the helpless. That is why I believe that in this day and age it is growing ever more important to defend and protect the rights of animals because the animal rights issue is a human rights issue. We have to recognize it is not our inherent right as “superior” beings to help the oppressed, but our duty as creatures that share this planet together. Only when we let go of our power struggle over other creatures of God will we then carry out the same for other human beings.

A.K.C.
When I first arrived on Illinois Wesleyan’s campus as a first-year student, I was a fiery and passionate Christian young man. I had one purpose for being a student for the next four years of college: lead my fellow students to Christ. For each person I met and befriended, I wondered if they were saved by Jesus, and if they weren’t, I would pray for them and invite them to church, hoping they would encounter God like I had. I was heavily involved with a church in town, was an intern there for one summer, and even led a bible study on campus for two years. I would walk around the campus Quad either alone or with my church friends every week and pray for the campus to be saved and we would more often than not hand out cool-looking invitations cards to our church to random students who were walking by or studying on the Quad. Every week I would send out a mass text-message to the friends I had on campus inviting them to bible study, hoping at least some would come that week and hear about Jesus. I avoided drinking parties and other activities that I thought were un-Christian in order to not taint my image as a strong Christian on campus so that people would trust me as a person they could approach in order to learn about Jesus. I was sure that every person on Earth who was not a Christian was going to Hell and that telling my classmates about Jesus was the most loving thing I could do for people so that they could know the one true God and be saved and end up in Heaven with me after we all die. I gave my everything to that cause…and it was exhausting.

Looking back on that younger me, I smile and have many good memories from that intense evangelism-focused lifestyle. I made lifelong friendships in my bible study, on campus, and in my church during those first years of college. I truly believe God did many great things in my life and in my friend’s lives during that time as well. But during my third year of college, a shift began to happen in my heart, and I feel that God started to lead me on a very important journey in discovering how I should truly love people the way Jesus did, and the way God wants humans to love one another during our short lives.

This shift in my heart began around the time that I went with my parents to visit my brother in Cairo, Egypt during the Winter Break of my third year. When we arrived in Egypt, I immediately felt the culture shock hit me. Not only were there differences in the way people dressed, talked, cooked, interacted, and thought, but the majority of people on the crowded streets of Cairo were Muslim, which meant that their deep beliefs about God, the afterlife, salvation, Jesus, and how to live one’s life were different than my own. This was jarring at first. But one experience in a poor working-class section of Cairo called Imbaba transformed me. One of my brother’s friends there, Hazam, invited our family over to his home for dinner. My brother, Matt, told us that this man and his family lived in a poorer part of Cairo and that he was a security guard that he had gotten to know at the school he was enrolled in. I was a bit uncomfortable because I wondered how I was going to connect with this man and his family when they barely spoke English, if we would be safe in a poor part of Cairo, if my stomach could even handle home-cooked Egyptian food, and if they would even like our family of white Christian Americans.

When we met up with Hazam near the metro stop that night, I was immediately taken aback by how happy he was to meet us and lead us through the many side streets to his little apartment. He was trying his best to speak English to us and was gushing with excitement for us to be with him and to meet his wife and newborn baby girl. Before we arrived at his house we stopped in a little street cafe and Hazam ordered us drinks. Before I knew it, he had left our table, pulled out a special rug from the corner of the cafe, laid it on the ground, and began praying because the Muslim call to prayer was happening.
was shocked! This man was so dedicated to his faith that, even though we had not arrived yet at his home, he stopped, made sure we were comfortable, and then faithfully prayed to God. After about ten minutes he finished and led us the rest of the way to his apartment. His wife greeted us with a huge smile and open arms and was saying the most welcoming things to us as my brother translated her Arabic. We talked for awhile, my brother mostly translating between us, and then we sat down and enjoyed an amazing amount of food she had undoubtedly spent most of the day preparing. After dinner, Hazam asked my brother if he could share his faith with my dad and I. I thought in my head, “Oh great, here it comes, he is going to try and convert us.” But what happened next was very different than that. Hazam, speaking in Arabic, began to share how much he loves God. He described how faithful God has been to him, and how the Qu'ran has helped him every day to be a good person. He pointed to a beautiful picture on the wall that had all the names for Allah, and gently described each name to us with such a love and affection that was so evident in his voice. And that was it. There was no pressuring us to convert or uncomfortable questioning about our beliefs. Hazam just shared his story with us and his love for God. I felt loved by God through him and his family that night and their hospitality to us was breathtaking. I saw so much of my Christian faith alive in their actions to us and I witnessed true hospitality from them that pointed me to God in a way I had rarely experienced before in life. I met many more amazing Muslim men and women on that trip and I felt like the religious differences that I feared going into Cairo had melted away by the time I left because I had seen that my faith was just as important to me as their faith was to them.

Coming back to school after that winter break, I felt that my mind and heart had shifted in how I viewed people and how I viewed my own faith. I started looking at people who held different religious views than me in a new light. Where I used to label every non-Christian as most importantly people who are “lost,” “unsaved,” “in need of Jesus,” “rebellious,” and “in sin,” now I thought of these people as most importantly valuable, loved by God, and people I need to know and learn from. I went from thinking that my belief in God, my theology, my way of worship, my Scriptures, and my religious preferences when all the standard for everyone on Earth to thinking that maybe I don’t know everything and maybe I need to open my eyes to other people’s beliefs and revelations, instead of just my own. For the first time in my life, I began critically looking at what I had been taught to believe and what I had always accepted as true about God, reexamining the foundations of my faith like Descartes did in his Meditations.

I began to ask myself some new questions: What do I believe about God? What do I believe about the Bible? Is it really without error or flaw, written inspired by God and therefore perfect? What do I believe about Jesus? Is he the only way to God? What does that way look like? How narrow is that path to God, and can I even know the answer to that question? Do the billions of non-Christians who have lived before and after me really have a one-way ticket to Hell since they didn’t put their faith in Jesus during their short lives? Can people in the LGBT community be Christians if the Bible says that their lifestyle is sinful? Is the Bible right or wrong on what it says about homosexuality, women, slavery, punishment, and other important topics? As I began looking at these questions, I began to see how little I really knew about my own faith and what I believed, and also how it affected the way I lived out love for others.

I began to realize that I had been a little off in how I loved people my first years of college. Because I was 100% certain that I knew the exact, unquestionable, and unchanging path...
to God, I had a “holier-than-thou” mindset, thinking that I was saved and others were just plain lost. Calling my church friends my “brothers and sisters” and everyone else the “unsaved” automatically placed my Christian bubble of friends and I on a higher spiritual plain than everyone else. I look back and see some classmates that I got to know, befriended, and invited to church many weeks in a row, but then after awhile stopped talking with them because they just would not come to church or Bible study with me. Even though I didn’t notice it then, I was loving those people with a conditional love instead of with God’s unconditional love. I unconsciously was only sticking with the people who were going to church with me, who I thought God was “in the process of saving,” instead of just loving all people and becoming friends with them for the sole reason that they are fellow human beings who deserve love. My best friends were Christians because I thought that if I became too good of friends with non-Christians I would be drawn out of my faith because they would never be talking about Jesus or God, and they wouldn’t encourage me to live out my Christianity every day. I missed out on a lot of good relationships back then because of these judgments, and this all was a result of my beliefs that I was saved and others were lost, and that all of my theology was holy and other theology or religions were profane. I am thankful God began to humble me and teach me how much I still don’t know about him after my trip to Egypt.

The most important thing I’ve learned from being a part of Interfaith work is to have a certain heart posture towards others that did not occur to me before. This heart posture is the way in which I approach people that I encounter every day in this world. Having this heart posture means approaching every person I encounter with love, understanding, respect, equality, peace, patience, and kindness. I live in a world where my neighbor is no longer going to be just like me, but they will be different, maybe from a different country, and most likely someone who believes different things about the foundations of the world, God, heaven, hell, and salvation. How do I love my neighbor well like God has asked me to? I do this by loving them with an unconditional love, speaking with them in order to understand their life instead of being the one doing all the talking, respecting their beliefs like I would want them to respect my own, treating them as equals to me and not as lower in spiritual knowledge or status, advancing peace in my relationship with them and being patient when I feel like I do not understand where they are coming from or why they believe a certain thing, and finally being kind always, especially if kindness is not reciprocated. This is how I ought to love my neighbor. Interfaith work has taught me a lot about God’s love and I am thankful for that. Of course, this does not mean I am not allowed to share my faith with my neighbor, but it means I should not base my relationship with them off of whether or not they convert to my specific beliefs or not; that is not true love, and I believe that is putting God in a box. What if God has not designed every one of his beloved humans to believe in the same theology and practice the same religion? What if diversity of belief on earth is a way in which God displays his glory, majesty, mystery, justice, and the unsearchable depths of his knowledge?

One thing I do know is that I should value hospitality, kindness, and service to others over all else, just like Hazam demonstrated so beautifully to my family in Cairo.

Mark Timmerman
“You don’t have to cover your head, madam. You can just go in,” the guard said as he directed me inside. It was 2:00pm in the heart of Old Delhi, and I was entering the largest mosque in India. I felt a homelessness I’d never known; most ironically in the country I called my home. I wanted more than anything to blend in with the other hijabis entering Jama Masjid, to go unnoticed in a sea of worshippers while I observed quietly nearby. After all, I was in the hub of a country divided by religious intolerance and a mistrust of the other. The last thing I needed was to be identified as a Hindu.

The road to Jama had not been an easy one. Twice we had been told the traffic was too dense to reach the center of the city, but I knew this wasn’t the case. The car we rented had been playing Hindu mantras for two days, its driver a devout man whose dashboard had a small icon of Lord Ganesha nestled in the center. On the day that we finally convinced him to take us to Jama, he simply directed us down the road once we were close enough.

So of course, I hesitated entering a Muslim place of worship when simply uttering its name had given our driver anxiety. A motion so seemingly inconsequential felt like it was challenging every bit of my identity, as if walking into Jama meant I was betraying some part of my history. I nodded to the guard and did as he suggested – I just went in. With every step, it seemed Jama grew threefold more expansive. I felt so incredibly small in its presence, dwarfed by its towering minarets and 260-ft span.

An elderly man approached my father and me, and showed us to the entrance of the prayer hall. “If you sit here, you can get a really nice photograph of the masjid,” he said. He too could tell, just as the guard had, that I was nervous. He led us toward the prayer hall, a space I thought would’ve been off-limits to me both as a Hindu and a woman. He was delighted to show us how people prayed, appeasing my tension with every enthusiastic word. Outside, Muslim men and women sat with their children, quietly exchanging hellos near the fountain. At Hindu temples, there was barely any space to pray and I bore a silent resentment against those who loudly shouted and shoved to get a closer look at the deities. Here there was a profound silence, a discipline unfamiliar to me. I felt my faith renewed.

When at last we turned to leave and offered our new friend a paltry twenty rupees for his time, he turned it down. “I am here as a servant of Allah, you do not have to thank me.”

My encounter with Islam was not unique in nature. In the days following, as I hopped from one religiously alien site to another, I saw the same grace and hospitality everywhere. At Sis Ganj Gurudwar, devotees helped us tie coverings over our heads and directed us to Langar. At the Dhauligiri Buddha Shanti Stupa, monks told us about the history of the temple and its significance in the religious narrative of India. The very devotees that I was conditioned to distrust and differentiate myself from were opening up the most personal parts of their lives to me.

In some ways, India is the most ideal candidate to engage in interfaith cooperation. As the birthplace of four of the world’s major traditions, it has both the infrastructure and history necessary for such work – ancient Hindu temples neighbor centuries-old mosques, Buddhist monasteries, Jain temples, Sikh gurudwaras, and Catholic churches. The governmental structure has in place a Hindu president, Muslim vice president, and Sikh prime minister.
Lisa Mishra

The sincerity and compassion of those I met in India is proof that there exists a contrasting culture of pluralists simply waiting for the opportunity to share their faith. The lessons I learned have brought new life to my work as a Multifaith Ambassador. In the last semester, I have had several opportunities to meet with campus religious leaders and discuss the creation of an interfaith prayer space at Illinois Wesleyan. The emerging consensus is that such a space is vital to sustaining our commitment to engaging diversity and nourishing the whole self. I hope to configure this space bearing in mind the welcome offered me at Jama Masjid, and that this spirit of welcome could one day be extended to all.

L.M.
I used to try to fit my interfaith story into a sort of formula, but it just wouldn't cooperate. The books I read seemed to follow a similar pattern, beginning with people of different beliefs in disagreement, who then got to know each other and eventually learned to find common ground. Mine wouldn't fit because it started from the ending, and I've come to realize that my story has been working in the opposite direction.

I grew up with consistent exposure to interfaith dialogue. My family knew the local imam, which connected me to the Muslim community, and I occasionally attended both Jewish and Muslim services. Even within my own family, I had experience with different branches of Christianity—my paternal grandfather is a Baptist minister, my father recently became Catholic, and my mother is Presbyterian… you get the idea. If I had owned a car, it would have had one of those “Coexist” bumper stickers on the back. I have long been accustomed to religious diversity—something not too common in the world of Dubuque, Iowa—and I thought this gave me a head start in the sphere of interfaith tolerance. After all, I got along with everyone and my interfaith conversations remained safely within the bounds of common ground.

But then something happened the summer before my freshman year that turned my complacently peaceful world upside-down. My dad was diagnosed with kidney cancer, and it absolutely tore me apart. He was my rock, always energetic and ready for adventure, but now he was suddenly weak, disheartened, and walking with a cane. The silence in my home was deafening, and small talk outside of it so upsettingly trivial. For a while we didn't know if he would recover, and of course I imagined the worst.

I have never felt so helpless in my life as I did then. I felt like I needed to pray constantly, as I could do nothing else. But I couldn't pray. I was so petrified that I couldn't focus enough to do the one thing that I desperately needed to do, and this unfulfilled responsibility became a huge burden. What kept me sane and eased my guilt was knowing that people were praying for him in my stead. I was particularly surprised and touched to hear that there was a special prayer said for my dad and family at the weekly Qur’an reading, and that my dad’s Jewish colleagues were keeping him in prayers as well. This unexpected act of love came at a time I needed it most, exactly in the way I needed it most.

It was unspeakably beautiful to me that so many people from completely different social and religious circles came together to help me pray for my dad. I felt that this massive weight had been lifted from my shoulders, that my Muslim and Jewish neighbors were doing for me what St. Paul urges in Galations 6:2: “carry one another’s burdens….” This is when I first realized that we weren’t just coexisting, and that mere tolerance wasn’t enough. We needed to be truly engaged in each other’s lives. They taught me how to be a better Christian, as I felt welcomed into family. Jesus was always reaching across boundaries to welcome people from other cultures into his life, and the Muslim and Jewish communities showed me how to do that, treating a Catholic as their own brother.

However, if I wanted to follow their example and really get to know people I couldn't ignore our differences anymore, for to ignore differences was to erase important aspects of who they are.

Still, I did my best to ignore this troubling realization, because it was a lot easier to focus on what our religions had in common:
Hannah Eby

love, peace, and a desire to just get along. If I know one thing about myself, it’s that I hate to disagree with people—about anything. Here, for example, is a real-life conversation between me and a couple of friends:

B: “It’s so hot out here.”
Me: “I know, I’m sweating.”
A: “Really? I’m kind of cold.”
Me: “Yeah, me too.”

I do this without even recognizing it sometimes. This is not to say that I don’t have firm convictions, because I do. But I have recently realized that I will do almost anything in my power to hide the fact that I disagree with someone on any issue, be it as insignificant as the weather conditions or as indispensable as my religious views. I used to think that this was a good thing, that I was just keeping the peace and avoiding conflict. In fact, I thought that this made me a sort of interfaith expert, able to cut out the part of the story where people disagree and skip to the last page where common ground is discovered.

Joining the team of Multifaith Ambassadors at IWU, however, completely changed the meaning of interfaith engagement for me. At first, I still imagined myself the expert. We discussed how every religion and non-religious philosophy has some form of the golden rule, and how human compassion is universally foundational. I read more stories about people finding common ground and was feeling pretty good about myself.

But during my second year working at the chapel, we started moving into more dangerous territory. We began opening ReligiosiTEA to more problematic topics, asking each other difficult questions and sometimes finding it hard to agree.

These discussions, along with interfaith community service activities, helped me build deeper relationships with the people around me.

It had been all-too-easy for me to simply disregard the deeper distinctions between our religions, but I came to recognize that ignoring boundaries had made me blind to the beauty of crossing them.

One day, the famous saying that “all religions are just different paths up the same mountain” came up in conversation. While I once would have easily accepted this as truth, I found that it now disconcerted me. This sounded like a claim that our religious differences were purely superficial, that the path itself didn’t really matter. As a backpacking enthusiast myself, I knew all too well what a different experience each trail brings. Every path holds challenges and wonders of its own, and no view is the same. I began to think that if we dismiss all ways as essentially the same, we don’t really get to know the people on the other paths, because we are also dismissing their personal experience. I realized that I had been sugar-coating some religions distinctions—be they tradition, ritual or foundational belief—and that by doing so I was trivializing the value of these diverse experiences.

I could no longer replace “interfaith” with “common ground.” Recognizing diversity—this time a deeper, more controversial diversity—meant that I couldn’t gloss over the difficult questions or discount the fact that some of us have different answers. And this meant that I sometimes had no choice but to disagree. It had been all-too-easy for me to simply disregard the deeper distinctions between our religions, but I came to recognize that ignoring boundaries had made me blind to the beauty of crossing them.
It was a simple act of hospitality during the Chicago Alternative Fall Break trip that finally confirmed this for me.

About twenty of us IWU students filed slowly into a small office building, which functioned as a mosque. I craned my neck to see what was taking us so long to get inside, and what I saw was very touching. Two elderly Muslim women were taking the time to enthusiastically hug each and every student walking in the door, welcoming us like long-lost family. As we sat around tables and ate a home-cooked meal, the imam told us a little about their religious community.

His talk focused on what connected all of us—our traditions’ common foundations of love, equality, and peace. However, he also spoke about their unique and rich history, as they were previously associated with the Nation of Islam. (The imam himself actually traveled with and read the Qur’an for Malcolm X!) It was important that he focused his talk on the love and values that connect us. But if he had conveniently passed over the difficult history between Nation of Islam and my predominantly-white Presbyterian tradition, those women's hugs wouldn't have been so significant. Talking about the racism and religious tension that our traditions have to overcome made their hospitality stand out to me as remarkably Christ-like: overwhelmingly generous and forgiving, and willingly vulnerable to strangers—solely for the sake of relationship. This experience became a reminder to me that I need to recognize tension and difference in order to witness the unique beauty of boundary-crossing.

The Sufi poet Rumi said, “The wound is the place where the Light enters in.” It’s so much easier to avoid the wounds, the difficult conversations. I often hear, “you believe what you believe and I’ll believe what I believe,” with the implication that diversity is acceptable on a surface level but shouldn’t really be talked about. If we give in to this culture of avoidance and take the easy way out, we miss the opportunity to form extra-meaningful relationships and experience real hospitality. We deny ourselves the ability to live with questions and to stretch our minds by learning from others. Furthermore, the idea that it’s better to avoid talking about religion and our deeply-held convictions is not only wrong, it’s dangerous. Dismissing what distinguishes us doesn’t allow us to truly get to know other people, and therefore facilitates stereotyping, mistrust, and conflict. We need interfaith relationships built on trust in order to be able to deal with controversy when it arises.

True peace is difficult – it takes work. Collaborating with my fellow Multifaith Ambassadors and Chaplain Elyse Nelson-Winger has given me experiences that have completely changed how I value interfaith relationships. They have taught me that while we should still be rooted in trust and search for common ground, embracing our diversity at its deepest level is an essential and meaningful step towards creating a more peaceful world.

H.E.
Before my senior year at Illinois Wesleyan University, my interfaith work was limited to liking the COEXIST symbols I would see on people’s Facebook or cars and my long-held belief that the world is made up of many diverse and beautiful cultures. I have always believed in diversity, but I never realized how much our differences can make us grow. I was born and raised Roman Catholic and attended Catholic schools my whole life until college. My mother, in fact, was brought up Methodist and then Lutheran, becoming Catholic when I took my First Communion. Catholicism was a large part of my family, and being Catholic made me feel happy and close to God.

After beginning college, my best friend mentioned something to me called the Bahá’í faith. According to their website (http://www.bahai.org/), this religion teaches the following: “The Founders of all the great religions have come from God and all of the religious systems established by Them are part of a single divine plan directed by God.” As I began thinking about this concept, I began to integrate it more and more. I have always seen majesty and truth in other religions, but this was taking it one step farther. And I did. Discovering about this religion led me to my personal belief that everyone should follow the religion that makes them a good person and brings them closest to God. This is my first and longest-held interfaith belief.

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As previously mentioned, growing up in a Catholic community meant that I had not had many opportunities to make friends with those who followed religions other than my own. Being in college totally changed this fact. Within my group of three best friends freshman year, my roommate was a non-practicing Catholic; another, a non-denominational Christian; and another, a professed atheist. What diversity in such a small group.

Friendship would become a theme for me in my personal interfaith work. Other than these three, I developed many other rich friendships along my college path. With the other ambassadors, I have developed friendships spanning all types of Christianity, the three monotheistic religions, combinative faiths, and even no faith at all. I have learned that friendship can be formed from far more than common interests, and I love each and everyone one of the other ambassadors simply because of their personalities and the good they bring to our common work.

Later in my college years, I finally met people who were Hindu and saw the beauty of that religion, and I eventually met people who practiced Islam as well. Learning about Islam was what first prompted my interest in the inextricable link between culture, politics, and religion.

One example can be found in France, that since 1905, has held a firm stance of secularism known as laïcité. I entered a nation one hundred years deep in that tradition when I went to Paris to study abroad this past spring. France has been increasingly populated by immigrants of North Africa—Algeria, Tunisia, and Morocco in particular. These areas are predominantly Muslim, and these immigrants bring Islam to France with them. However, Islam works particularly “badly” with the French notion of secularism, as some practicing Muslims will pray up to five times daily, which often requires praying in public, and many Muslim women choose to wear anything from a head scarf to a burqa.

While many debates are being held on these issues, I only came in contact with them by overhearing or in the classroom.

Ashleen Davey ’14 is a Multifaith Ambassador. She is from Barrington, Illinois and is Roman Catholic. She is a Voice major.
While I was in France, I only experienced what I truly consider love from a Muslim husband and wife. The pair were both from Morocco; the husband, my local baker, and his wife, a young student. The baker was the only person in France who was considerably kind to me (and he did give me food), as was his wife. On the last night of my trip, she invited me over to her home, and we found ourselves in a three-hour discussion of our religions. She told me about what she found to make her truly Muslim, as well as telling me why Muslim women felt they should wear the head scarf and why she herself did not. I do not think I have ever been more surprised, educated, and delighted by one conversation. This became my first interfaith discussion, hardly to be the last. One more aspect of Islam taught me enormously about my own faith. For a while, I could neither fathom nor understand what could possibly so divide the Muslim community in the Sunni/Shiite split. Almost incredulously, I came to realize that this was nearly the same divide that occurred in my own religion between Protestants and Catholics. In our modern world, tortured and threatened by a small group of Islamic extremists, now more than ever, we need to take the opportunity to inform ourselves about this religion, as it will inform our politics and our lives.

Being back at Illinois Wesleyan once again meant new opportunities and challenges. While I have found comfort and joy in participating in my own Catholicism by attending and singing at Holy Trinity Catholic Church, this year, something seemed to be telling me it was not enough. A wonderful speaker, Sister Simone Campbell, came to speak in November on her activism in Catholic politics. Afterwards, I met with Chaplain Elyse Nelson Winger and told her I wanted to be more involved. I applied just this semester to become a Multifaith Ambassador. After accepting the position on January 13, bam! my level of interfaith life has soared. As a relative newcomer to the interfaith bandwagon, the effects in this short time. I have never been happier, and I have never been stronger in my own faith. I have found that through sharing, and most especially telling our beliefs to others, we remind ourselves of why we hold them so dear.

A.D.
Established in Fall 2012 through the Office of University Chaplain at Evelyn Chapel, the Multifaith Ambassador Program is a stipended leadership program for students who are interested in:

♦ Deepening their appreciation for and friendship with people from different religious and non-religious backgrounds
♦ Creating bonds of compassion and cooperation on Illinois Wesleyan’s campus
♦ Discovering what it means to be a person of faith in a pluralistic society
♦ Working for social justice in an interfaith context

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Elyse Nelson Winger, University Chaplain
Learn more at www.iwu.edu/chaplain