**Semester at Sea Celebrates World Interfaith Harmony Week**

An enthusiastic group of interfaith university students held three events to celebrate World Interfaith Harmony Week on the Spring 2020 voyage of the study abroad program called “Semester at Sea.” The events were held from February 24-26, 2020, under the theme “Navigating Interfaith Waters Together.” The events were originally scheduled to occur during the first week of February, but due to the global outbreak of the Coronavirus, many changes to the voyage’s itinerary caused a delay. In spite of many unplanned adaptations, the WIHW events allowed the entire shipboard community (700+ representing over 25 different countries) to learn about the global interfaith initiative adopted by the UN, learn truths and practices of a variety of belief systems, and practice interreligious engagement that leads to a culture of peace which benefits us all.

The events were facilitated by a group of multi-faith and belief students, professors and staff. Three months prior (back on land), these shipboard events were initiated and sponsored by the Fort Collins Interfaith Council and the Multi-Faith & Belief Student Council at Colorado State University, in the USA. These two groups collaborated to co-sponsor WIHW events on this voyage of Semester at Sea to impact college students who are likely to be in positions of private and public global leadership and policymaking in the future. These groups acknowledge that our global culture of peace begins now.

A piece of context that is important to note: Unfortunately, the Spring 2020 voyage of Semester at Sea was impacted greatly due to the global outbreak of the Coronavirus. On January 1st, the original itinerary included eleven different global port stops, and by late February, this had been reduced to four. Many students on the voyage were negotiating their visas being denied and their families being affected by the virus back home, particularly our Chinese national students. Over the course of a few weeks, as the virus’ shadow grew around the world, our shipboard community could be imagined as a microcosm of our larger global community, where borders were closing one after another. At a critical moment during this voyage, when many passengers were making plans to literally abandon ship and return home, interfaith and belief engagement offered the opportunity to bond our community in solidarity. Facilitated diverse engagement helped to spur a change in the mood of the community from disappointment, fear, and helplessness into an opportunity for communal vision, compassion, and resilience. A deep community need was filled by the WIHW engagement, where people could show up and be vulnerable with one another and find a strong network of diverse companions, bonded by mutual respect and interdependent resilience.

**Three WIHW Events:**

Acknowledging the impetus for world peace and harmony through diversity, before each of the three events the UN Resolution adopting World Interfaith Harmony Week was read aloud for the gathered audience. Additionally, to promote cross-pollination of belief diversity, upon arrival to each event all participants were asked to create a nametag that noted their preferred name and belief-identity and then invited to intentionally interact with folks who identified differently.

The first event was a viewing and discussion of an episode of the National Geographic documentary *The Story of God with Morgan Freeman.*Students, professors, companions, staff and all other members of the shipboard community were invited to view an episode of the show in a community theater on the ship then participate in a discussion afterwards. The episode that was chosen to be screened was titled “Proof of God," which offered a comparative look at different theological and scientific conceptualizations of the divine. This episode was chosen because it offered a thoughtful text that promoted religious understanding.

After the screening, participants gathered into groups of ten for interfaith dialogues in which they were invited to share their own beliefs of the divine and respectfully learn the truths of others. One student who attended the event, Genesis Fortner, said, "I sat and had a conversation with an Atheist. I listened to her with eager ears as I’ve never had the opportunity to engage with an Atheist on such a profound level. As I listened, I became aware that there were some concepts that I agreed with, and others that I didn’t believe in.” Fortner offered that the most impactful part was that everyone agreed that all worthy of respect and dignity. Many shared this sentiment as the conversations carried on well past the intended conclusion of the event. The harmonious mood that followed was sustained because many truths were voiced, each holding a welcomed note in our interfaith song.

  The second event that was held was called “Spiritual Play-Doh and Belief-based Family Photos.” This event was meant to be an inviting, creative and engaging opportunity for the shipboard community to express religious/nonreligious beliefs and values in a fun and low-stakes manner. Shipboard members gathered together with tubs of play-doh/clay and made creations that were symbolic of their faith, values, and/or worldviews. Many students sculpted religious symbols. Other students sculpted creations such as peace signs or hearts that represented their core values rather than a specific religious belief. Sharing occurred, accompanied by peels of childlike laughter brought on by the creative experience. Afterwards, participants gathered outside in front of the beautiful backdrop of a sunset on the Indian ocean to take “belief-based identity family photos.” Participants chose signs identifying their belief-tradition and were given the opportunity to take a “family photo” with those with different signs. This photo session was filled with smiles and laughter and led to many organic conversations about tolerance, unity through diversity and the imperative of peace, love and compassion.

One participant of the event, Alexis Crea, stated, "After a bunch of people had taken a family photo at our play-doh event, two students started discussing their signs that they held. One was Roman Catholic, and the other was Jewish. This was very interesting to me because I have never seen two people talk about their religions so freely, especially when they are both such dedicated believers. They talked about their family rituals, one asking the other about how she feels during specific cultural holidays. The answer was as complex as religion itself. Their conversation was a great example of tolerance of others views because neither of them were trying to change the other person’s beliefs. They were both listening to each other, and both clearly wanted to learn more about the other person." Passers-by gathered to witness the family photos and a random voice from the crowd shouted “the world needs more of that!”

  The last event was an Interfaith Meal of Gratitude. The meal began with the UN Resolution of WIHW followed by representatives of different faiths and belief systems sharing prayers and blessings before the meal. Some of the belief systems represented in the blessings were Buddhism, Humanism, Judaism, Hinduism and Christianity. Following the blessings, participants engaged in interfaith dialogue around tables of shared food. Discussion prompts around the theme of gratitude were offered to help participants discover unifying values. An attendee of the event, Melina Asnani, explained thought that it took a lot of maturity for folks from the ages from 19-72 to sit around and talk about religion with people of other faiths. She explained that she sat with five people I had never met before this voyage, “We all openly talked about how our religious views changed when we moved away from home to college. It was a very open discussion, and people discussed how meeting others with different worldviews affected their current beliefs.” Asnani concluded that speaking about religion and being open to diversity as college students can promote a culture of peace.

Nicole Gormley, a student event facilitator, who grew up Catholic and currently identify as Agnostic, accounts “I sat at a table with a professor who identifies as “Baptist/Seeker” and two students who identify as Jewish.” Gormley found it interesting hearing the similarities and differences between her growing up Catholic, him Baptist and them, Jewish. “We all went through ‘coming of age’ moments in our religions when we were in middle school. For me it was my Confirmation and for two of them it was their Bat Mitzvahs.” Gormley also shared about how her understanding of history led to her decisions to move away from Catholicism and listened to her conversation partners shared how their learning of history had the opposite effect for them, as “Judaism and the struggles that their ancestors faced made them feel more connected with their faith. It was very interesting and eye-opening to learn so much about someone else’s perspective of growing up with a different faith, and I hope to have future opportunities in my life to have more deep discussions with others about growing up with different belief systems.” Gormley reflected a few days later that the conversation she had at the Meal of Gratitude that evening ranks as one of the most impactful few hours of her spiritual life thus far.

Many interfaith tables decided to stay seated and keep up conversation even after they had finished their meals. That evening, participants came to discuss how gratitude shows up in their spiritual tradition and they drifted out a few hours later with a deeper understanding of how this common thread runs through each of us and can inspire unity through diversity.

**Moving into deeper interfaith waters**

In the near future, Semester at Sea students will continue “Navigating Interfaith Waters Together” well past Interfaith World Harmony Week as several students are scheduled to spend the day with many different religious leaders in South Africa with the Cape Town Interfaith Initiative. As students end their study abroad with Semester at Sea, they will take back the experiences of WIHW to universities across the globe and plant seeds of interfaith harmony for our future of peace.

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