Semester at Sea Celebrates World Interfaith Harmony Week

By Nicole Gormley

Students on the Spring 2020 voyage of the study abroad program Semester at Sea held three events for World Interfaith Harmony Week in order to facilitate positive and respectful engagement between shipboard members of different faiths and beliefs. The events were lead and organized by professor Elizabeth Sink and her Interfaith and Inclusive Communication class.

The first event was a viewing and discussion of an episode of the National Geographic documentary show *The Story of God with Morgan Freeman.*Students, professors, companions, 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".

After the screening, all participants of the event were open to share and were respectful of others' thoughts and beliefs during the discussion that followed. 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, but we were all worth respect and dignity".

The second event that was held was called “Spiritual Play-Doh, Belief-based Family Photos, and Casual Conversation”. Shipboard members gathered together with tubs of play-doh and made creations that were symbolic of their faith, values, and/or world-views. 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. Afterwards, participants gathered outside in front of the beautiful backdrop of a sunset on the Indian ocean to take belief-based family photos. Cards containing the names of many different faiths were laid out and participants could pick one card or a combination of several that they personally identified with to hold up for group photos.

One participant of the event, Alexis Crea, stated, "During our 3 interfaith events that we put on, I witnessed many incredible interactions. There was one in particular that caught my eye. After a bunch of people had taken a family photo at our play-doh event, 2 girls 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 2 people talk about their religions so freely, especially when they are dedicated believers. They talked about their family rituals, one asking the other about how she feels during the holidays. The answer was as complex as religion itself, 'my mom is Christian, my dad is Jewish, so we celebrate both. But over the years I have felt much more connection to my Jewish faith'. Their conversation was a great example of tolerance of others views because neither of them were trying to change the other persons beliefs. They were both listening to each other, and both clearly wanted to learn more about the other person."

The last event was an Interfaith Meal of Gratitude. Unfortunately, the Spring 2020 voyage of Semester at Sea went through several different itinerary changes due to the outbreak of the Coronavirus. This last event was held right before a disappointing change in itinerary and upsetting rumors were spreading all around the ship. The participants of the Interfaith Meal of Gratitude did not let the rumors negatively impact the event though. The turn-out for the meal was the highest of all three events, and all participants were able to put thoughts of rumors aside for an hour in order to have a very lively, respectful, and impactful conversation about faiths and identities. The meal began by representatives of different faiths and belief systems being invited up to give a prayer or blessing before the meal. Some of the belief systems represented in the blessings were Buddhism, Humanism, Judaism, and Christianity.

An attendee of the event, Melina Asnani, said, "It takes a lot of maturity for kids from the ages from 18-22 to sit around and talk about religion with people of other faiths. I was sitting with five students. We all openly talked about how we felt our religious views changed when we moved away from home to college. We all found that we were able to discover our religious beliefs from ourselves without the influence of our family. It was a very open discussion, and people discussed how meeting people with different view on life in college affected our current beliefs. This portrays how speaking about religion and being open to diversity as college students can further students’ knowledge and teach people more about themselves."

Personally, I was raised Catholic and I currently identify as Agnostic. I sat at a table with a professor who identifies as Baptist/Seeker and two girls who identify as Jewish. It was interesting hearing the similarities and differences between growing up Catholic and growing up Jewish. We both went through “coming of age” moments in our religions when we were in middle school. For me it was my Confirmation and for them it was their Bat Mitzvahs. We also had a very impactful conversation where I talked about growing up and learning the history of the Catholic Church drew me away from my religion, but learning about the history of Judaism and the struggles that their ancestors faced made the two Jewish girls feel prouder and 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.

Many tables decided to stay seated and keep up conversation even after they had finished their meals. The dining hall had an aura of respect and engagement that is not present at most other meals on college campuses. Each participant came to the event with stories to share and open minds, and it lead to the creation of a unique and special event that positively impacted each participant.

The spirit of interfaith communication continues with Semester at Sea past Interfaith World Harmony Week as students of the Interfaith and Inclusive Communication class are scheduled to have lunch with several different religious leaders in Cape Town, South Africa in March.