

Anthony Hanna (2017 grad)

Tea

I would have never guessed that the University of Wisconsin-Whitewater was a very culturally diverse school, at least I wouldn't have guessed that as an incoming freshman. I was a very popular kid in high school. I thought that I was a culturally diverse person because I had friends who were "jocks," "nerds," "goth," "preppy," and I was even friends with the farmer kids. I was friends with every type of person in my high school and felt like maybe the "clique" mindset was finally something that had faded away, but when I got to college I found myself more lost than ever before. I had zero friends in this town. For my entire freshman year, I did everything -- from eating to studying and sleeping -- 100% alone. I felt like I did not belong anywhere, but one day I made a group of friends in the least suspecting way.

Being alone 24/7, I spent most of my time studying my heart out in Anderson Library. I was walking through one of the computer labs in there when I saw a classmate of mine and I decided to talk to the young man about the class we were taking. He invited me into a private study group room where I figured he was studying alone, so I accepted. When I walked into the room I was greeted by a man I had never seen before with the phrase, "Assalamu-Alaikum." Instantly I was shocked and two things jumped into my head. The first thing I thought was that I had been duped! I had never interacted with a Muslim before and at this point I was thinking that they might think I am Muslim too because of my similar skin tone and features. So, there I stood, frozen solid, like a block of ice. I didn't know what to say back and so the silence continued for what seemed like forever until another asked me what my name was. This question made me feel more comfortable, but this comfort instantly dissipated when I realized that my crucifix around my neck was showing. See for me, the crucifix is a way for me to remember and honor my grandfather who passed away more than it is a way to show my faith. I'm not very religious at all, but there I was in a room full of Muslim men that I had never talked to before with a shiny golden cross hanging from my neck. But, feeling brave I told them my name and they told me their names. Over half of the men in that room that day were named Mohammad. I had been growing increasingly nervous, but found the sweet/earthy scent in the room soothing and calming.

After we introduced ourselves, the classmate who invited me, who I now know as my friend Abdul-Aziz from Saudi Arabia, offered me a cup of tea. I did not want to offend anyone, so I accepted even though I am not the biggest fan of hot drinks. I drank the tea quickly even though it was piping hot just so I would not offend anyone. Eager to know my feelings, Abdul-Aziz asked me how I liked the tea and, in all honesty, I told him that it was some of the very best tea that I had ever had! It was a hot green tea with a unique lemon flavor that I had never experienced before -- or since -- that day. Feeling more comfortable from the good smells and warmth of my mug, I decided to address the "pink elephant" in the room and so I asked in a friendly way, "so you guys are all Muslim here?" They did not seem threatened at all and answered with an honest "yes." My response was "wow that is really cool!", because I was genuinely interested. I knew that they had seen my cross earlier and I felt like I just had to tell them that I am Greek Orthodox and that I'm not a very religious person. They seemed to take this information well; it wouldn't have mattered if I had been a priest. Once that was off my chest I felt relief. Because I entirely lacked experience with Muslim people, I just felt like I had to address these differences because at this point in the semester I had just been learning about the "Reconquista," the extended period when Spanish Catholics fought Muslim Moors and I did not know if this part of history would affect our relationship. I needn't have worried. I underestimated how "American" my friends from Saudi Arabia had become.

If you had told me 5 years ago that most of my friends in college would be Muslim, I would have thought you were crazy. Today my Muslim friends here at the University are some of my best friends. For a while I felt like I was going to be alone for my entire college career and this one experience completely

took that feeling away. I spent a year up until that point being a social recluse around people who were more similar to me than not, but it was in this experience that I found extreme comfort in a place that at first made me super uncomfortable. Since then I have taken the time to learn more about my religion and the different religions around me and what I have found surprised me greatly! We were not so different after all! We both believed in Abrahamic religions, but we just had different views of who the most important Prophet was. I did not know it then, but this experience completely changed my life forever.

I will admit, I was hesitant to even take my first sip of that tea for many reasons. I did not know if there was a special way to drink it (do I stick a pinky out?) or when to drink it; I did not know if I would like it since I usually do not enjoy most teas; and there was even the slightest doubt that the tea was safe for me to drink since I was the only person having some. Today, we live in a time where our president is notorious for being anti-Muslim. I have friends and family members who were just like me in the sense that they had never experienced being around a Muslim person before and I see some of them falling into the anti-Islamic sentiment that many Americans fall into just because they simply don't know much and are afraid of things that are different. I feel like without that experience that day I would be one of those people who adopt anti-Islamic sentiment as well out of ignorance. Since then I have been greatly accepting and understanding of those who have a different culture than I do and it was that experience alone that really gave me the confidence to go on to continuing my work to get an international studies degree. Who knew that your whole life could be completely changed over having a cup of tea with someone who is different than you? I'll never regret that day and wish that I had days like that sooner.