



# Finding Spiritual Connection and Friendship in a Group of Young Family Physicians

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**W**ould I be accepted? Would I fit in? These were the questions that plagued my mind as I prepared to attend the World Organization of Family Doctors' (WONCA) 2015 pre-conference exchange for young family doctors, held in Istanbul (The Vasco da Gama Movement, the WONCA group for fledgling family physicians in Europe, actually organized this exchange). I had read about inspiring learning opportunities from participants who attended past pre-conference exchanges and wanted to share in these unique experiences. Yet as the only African family doctor in the group, perhaps my feelings were not out of place.

As much as I looked forward to this opportunity to meet family doctors and trainees from different countries who, like me, were at the beginning of their careers, I was also concerned about the diversity I was about to encounter. Perhaps trepidation about religious tolerance bothered me most.

I am a Christian and like to talk freely about my faith in God. Having spent most of my life in Northern Nigeria, which has an almost equal population of Muslims and Christians, I have seen first-hand how conversations about faith can spin out of control, ending up in riots. At this point I must admit my personal

bias: I thought Muslims were often intolerant of other religions. Even though I had read people in Istanbul were kind to visitors, the recent political unrest in Turkey, in particular the terrorist attack widely attributed to ISIS that occurred in nearby Ankara just before my departure, made me anxious for my safety as a Christian. My fears notwithstanding, I felt a strong resolve to be part of the exchange. When my plane finally landed in Istanbul, I had difficulty finding the baggage claim area. A few people I asked did not speak English and seemed unwilling to help, fuelling my worries. "I am in a strange place, there are few of my people here," I thought, walking toward the arrival hall with the voice of uncertainty tormenting me. Then I saw Melike, my hostess, and a few others waiting. She held up a sign with my name. I saw the smiles on their faces and like the rush of many waters, I felt the warmth of their human kindness. It no longer mattered that I was the different one. The instant connection was almost magical.

If I thought this was a one-time occurrence, the ensuing days proved me wrong. I met many fledgling family doctors who were not biased against my being African, who showed me much love, and were tolerant when I spoke of my faith. We talked as though we had known each

other for years; we shared our stories, hugs, and kisses. Beyond all the kindred spirits I encountered, the city also endeared itself to me. Our tour took us past Galata tower, Bosphoros bridge, the Dohlmabace, the Maiden Tower, Kuskonmaz Mosque, and the Grand Bazaar. Each site, each monument, each piece of history had its own story, its own emotion.

The visit to the Sulthanamet Mosque is one I will never forget. As we walked toward that famous blue place of worship, I could not help but admire its solid walls, clean environment, minaret, and the crowd of tourists and worshippers gathered as one in its square. The real beauty was on the inside: the ambience, order, and lights made for a breathtaking collage of color. I had never been inside a mosque before and here I was, entering with three other family doctors of different faiths. I

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then turned to look at the colleague closest to me. She seemed lost in thought, with a faraway look in her eyes, as if she were searching for something. I wondered what it was.

I too began to look. I sat down on the soft carpet and looked again. Two of my colleagues sat with me but I did not ask them what they saw. I knew I had to look for myself. Then it came, first in trickles and then in waves. I recognized the yearning I had each morning and night. The yearning when the sky shone so bright and the birds chirped, the yearning when I sang hymns and listened to sermons, each yearning a cry to my creator. Though a non-Muslim, in that moment I also worshipped.

This experience reminded me of a similar one Lidia, a colleague at this exchange had shared: on her first morning in Istanbul, she was awakened by the melancholic and

deep singing of the muezzin. It did not matter that the prayers and practices were different, our yearning was the same. I thought of my country. Why was there so much hatred between adherents of different faiths? What were we missing?

Just then a stern voice startled me: "You are sitting on my spot," someone said, breaking into my daydreams. I looked up to see the smiling face of two other tourists who quickly assured me they meant no harm by joking with me. Then it happened again, the magic of connecting with complete strangers. We sat in a circle—a Buddhist, a free thinker, and Christians, speaking of family, faith, love, friendship, our countries, and our histories; not at a restaurant but in a mosque. I felt ashamed of the prejudices I previously had held against Muslims and adherents of other faiths.

I thought we were fortunate to end the exchange without any security scare but Demet said that this was more than mere luck. As soon as she shared this belief, I knew she was right. The exchange may be over but the memories of our time in this unique city remain. Now back in my country, connecting on a spiritual level with patients and colleagues of different faiths comes easily to me. I owe my transformation to this exchange between the continents, one that brought together a people so diverse, yet connected with the common chord of humanity.

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