

# Journey of the Heart, Mind and Spirit: A reflection of my time in the MALS program

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Two years ago, when speaking to my parents about my interest in pursuing a Master's degree, they both said the same thing, "Well, do you think it's worth all that money just to get another piece of paper?" I spent months hanging on those words. The fact was I wasn't really confident that "another piece of paper," a degree certificate, *was* going to be worth the years of upcoming financial debt. And so I did what any good graduate student should do, I researched. I studied statistics found online with titles like, "Post Graduate Annual Earnings Compared to Undergraduate Earnings" and "Employers Who Hire Master's Degree Applicants vs. Non-Post Graduate Applicants." The numbers were persuasive--surely in this competitive world a job-seeking individual with higher credentials would succeed in employment positions and earn a higher income than those who did not, right? An entire paper file of information convincing me of the career relevancy of further education weighed on my mind, and after four months I threw the file away. It was a perk to have another degree to add to my resume, but the real reason I wanted to continue my education wasn't so I could grow my skills for work, it was so I could grow my skills for *life*. Of course now that I am close to the end of my current academic journey my parents say what they are obligated to, that they "are so proud of me" and "impressed" I decided to go through with it all. But I know what they're really thinking is how large my monthly loan repayments will be, how much time with my new husband I've lost from sitting at the computer finishing assignments late into the night. I usually care deeply what my loved ones think and respect their opinions, but not here, not now. I know without a doubt that my two-year journey was not a waste, that there is not one penny I will regret spending and not one minute I regret studying. I don't know if my annual income will reflect those promising statistics, but I do know my character and the way that I understand life has increased beyond measure. This program did not change who I am, it has *strengthened* who I am.

On a personal level, the MALS degree presented me with information and materials that solidified my beliefs, opinions and thoughts on life. One of the greatest lessons learned was how complex and interconnected the world really is. I feel my understanding in how hunter gatherer societies paved the way to agriculture, which paved the way to civilizations, which paved the way to Christianity, which paved the way to gender roles, political boundaries and the industrial revolution, for example. Piecing together such different aspects of history and further, our planet, has been invaluable and I feel the world really does start to make sense. We're not just a jumbled planet of chaos, we have a cycle and sequence of events that has led us from a prehistoric world to a modern one.

One of the most intriguing aspects of this course was that we were exposed to "the other side of the story" in most subjects. Facts and events from the media and government that I once considered truth have a very different side, I've

discovered, and those counter arguments were presented to me during each course. For example, the typical negative view of Islam held by Americans is given a new reputation in the course 'Islamic World':

Since the Bush administration, the American people have been told to separate the religious views of Islam with the acts of terrorism. In an excerpt from the 'National Commission Report on Terrorist Attacks upon the United States,' it is written that, "Islam is not the enemy. It is not synonymous with terror. Nor does Islam teach terror. America and its friends oppose perversion of Islam, not the great world faith itself. Lives guided by religious faith, including literal beliefs in Holy Scriptures, are common to every religion, and represent no threat to us (Islamic World, pg. 1).

America's general views of Islam were also incorporated into the course "Dangerous Minds." The class went a step further beyond the association of Islam with acts of terror and challenged students to rethink the meaning of terror altogether. Through interactive assignments, films and readings explaining the causes of rebels and terrorists, I was able to alter my own definition of terror. I was extremely surprised to learn that most terrorist individuals in modern history have started out exactly where I am now, younger aged university students desiring to learn of the world and change the injustices that surround them. After focusing on terrorist groups such as the Irish Republican Army and the Red Army Faction, I found myself almost empathetic to their causes. Sympathizing with terrorists is not what I had planned to do in this degree, yet it somehow happened!

Other great examples of hearing the "other side of the story" was in studying some of the negative aspects of the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund and historical corruptions within the United States government ('Voices From Latin America' & 'Islamic World'). In the course 'Religion and Ecology,' students additionally had the opportunity to hear arguments against the widely praised Green Revolution. My own personal perceptions of many revolutions, organizations and corporations changed dramatically once I studied such things in depth. I have chosen an excerpt from my paper, "The IMF: More Good than Bad," illustrate this change:

The IMF lives by the Washington Consensus model, whose goals include fiscal austerity, privatization and market liberalization (Discontents, 53). And while these ideals do seem to pave the way to a stable and healthy economy, the IMF brings each goal to a nation in the wrong time and way, causing much financial pain and—in some cases—total market failure. The ideas are right but the timing and sequencing are wrong. One example of this is with the 1990's attempt at privatization in Morocco. Under the direction of the IMF, Morocco gave the chicken farming market to private owners and within months the market failed. Because the government had previously provided seven-day-old chicks to farmers and that investment was taken away with privatization, farmers could no longer yield a successful "chicken crop." The instantaneous move from government-owned to privately-owned chicken industry without the

appropriate steps in between ultimately led the failure of an entire Moroccan market. If governments decide to move to privatization at the request of the IMF, the IMF certainly must provide better sequencing to ensure a smooth transition. “The IMF simply assumed that markets arise quickly to meet every need, when in fact, many government activities arise because markets have *failed* to provide essential services (Global Economy, pg. 1).

Growing my knowledge of the workings of the world and studying specific subjects in depth has greatly strengthened my self-confidence. I find I can present better arguments for or against a topic, I have improved my leadership skills, and I have a great sense of timeliness--thanks to submission dates and timelines. My communication skills have been greatly impacted for the better through learning to respect the opinions of others (group blogs) and being exposed to the viewpoints of a variety of different people. I have learned how to communicate my own opinion to people in a manner that will not offend and I also appreciate the importance of communicating in an even-tempered tone. Understanding the dynamics of cyber communication is especially helpful in an age where much of our communication does occur online through emails, social media sites and instant messaging.

The selection of reading materials throughout this program has strengthened me personally because so many of the books that I probably would have been interested in as leisure reading I may never have actually read on my own. Some examples of these readings include *The Origins of the Cuban Revolution Reconsidered*, *The Body of God*, and *Breaking News*. It was wonderful to spend hours learning about new ecological theologies and surveys of history as opposed to the latest best-selling novels on Oprah’s Book List, like I would usually chose.

This was also the case with films. My faith typically discourages watching rated ‘R’ films and I found myself faced with moral dilemmas throughout this program. Ultimately I decided to watch each assigned rated ‘R’ film. Although many of them have left negative impressions, there were quite a few which better solidified my understanding of a topic studied.

Though I had originally thought this program might not benefit my career path, it has indeed contributed to my professionalism. During the majority of this degree I worked as a Study Abroad and Exchange Student Coordinator based in Australia. As you can imagine, working with international students, agents, and partners was the bulk of my position. Not long after the start of this program I noticed my knowledge of other cultures and world history was beginning to deepen and it assisted in situations I would have otherwise been confused in. For example, I enrolled in the course “Islamic World” prior to hosting thirty-five young male students from the United Arab Emirates. The class allowed me to study Islam as a religion and a culture and I even had the opportunity to read a portion of the Qur’an. When the students arrived I was well prepared with a designated prayer room, signs pointing in the direction of Mecca, menus using only halal meat, and lectures introducing the traditionally no-pet students to their temporary, furry roommates in the Western world.

I was also able to study and interview some of my own Saudi Arabian students using the assignment prompts of the course “Age of Revolutions.” An excerpt from my interview with the students discussing the possibility of legalizing driving for women is as follows:

It is the conservatives—the males who have been living in Saudi Arabia for generations and are not open to change who are the main road blocks in the ‘driver’ battle. They are the traditional, unenlightened men who see western women’s equality with males as wild and reckless. Giving women the right to drive would be a huge step towards liberal, western culture and that much closer to having their traditional world fall apart. Many younger-generational, educated males seem to side with the women and agree that driving should be a privilege enjoyed by all. In the beginning of the year, when Al-Sherif was jailed, I had the opportunity to talk with a group of 11 Saudi women students and ask about this strange law. Although I do not have the exact quote written, the conversation went like this:

**Kasey**-Do you ladies want to drive? Is this something you *want* to do?

**Saudi women**-Oh yes! We think it would be so much easier to get to school and work. We will make more money for our country if we can get to work easier.

**Kasey**-But don’t you have male drivers who are paid to take you to work if your guardians cannot do it?

**Saudi women**-We do have drivers, but they get very expensive. Sometimes it takes so much of your paycheck just for the driver.

**(A male Saudi intervened)**-They (the government) think it is safer for women to have a driver so that a man cannot harass her. But it is not a good law because the women are alone in a car with a man anyways!

**Kasey**-You tell me that women should not drive because they may be unsafe with males harassing them. Don’t you think that you should train the *males* in your society, then, to not harass instead of hiding the women?

**Saudi male and females**-...(No response).

**Kasey**-Do you think you will ever be able to drive?

**Saudi women**-Oh yes!

**Kasey**-When?

**Saudi women**-Soon! Very soon! We think maybe next year...(Age of Revolutions, pg. 4.)

Not only did the MALS degree assist me in my professional role at the time, but it also assisted the success of my most recent position with the United States Consulate General, Melbourne Australia Office. During my interviews in November 2012, I was questioned about the relevance of this degree in relation to the position I had applied for. I was able to identify many examples, including the

increase of my technical skills during my studies as I have mastered report writing, gathering information from reliable sources, working to a schedule and written communication. Clearly holding a Master's degree was of some importance to the hiring panel.

From an emotional level, I think I had to fight some internal battles during this program. Once we have been presented with holistic arguments for or against something during a class, it is difficult not to be passionate about what we students now know. One of the negative affects of my studies was that I developed a nasty habit of making judgments about some people. For example, after studying the importance of living sustainably with the environment during the class, "Religion and Ecology," I noticed I was a bit angry with people in my personal who were ignorant about such things. I have never been very patient with people who have blatant disrespect for the planet, but my judgments only got worse after studying the severity of Mother Nature's current condition. Tolerance will be the next challenge to myself after the completion of this degree.

Learning to emotionally remove myself from certain situations has been an important lesson. There were many classes that identified the negative affects of Christianity in nature and history, but rather than taking offense to such things (being Christian myself), I taught myself to look beyond the surface level of the emotional offense and see instead the validity to each argument.

I have grown my cultural sensitivity through this program. With many classes focusing on cross-cultural situations and social injustices of the world, I am more able to understand and empathize with people of other cultures. I currently act as a leader for approximately fifty female youth ages 12-18 in my church program. Some of my youth have come to Australia seeking asylum from Sudan, South Africa, and a few other places in that region. I was grateful to learn of the horrific events led by Joseph Kony and the Lord's Resistance Army in Sudan and Uganda during the course "Dangerous Minds." Gaining insight to some of the social struggles my young women have dealt with in their past allows me to connect and communicate with them better, as well as simply understanding them better. A paper that I wrote while studying apartheid observes the following:

Ethnic divide is apparent in the film "A Dry White Season," which captures apartheid in South Africa. From our readings, we learned just how unjust and serious apartheid was, including the "Pass," the Prohibition of Mixed Marriage Act, and the Group Areas Act. The characters represented the conflict between Dutch and British South Africans, and the new generations of Afrikaans. The new and younger generations endured segregation on many levels. For example, all scenes involving Ben's white family- -up until the last half hour of the film-- showed the family as carefree, smiling, laughing, sipping tea, and enjoying a beautiful and clean home. There were no such scenes involving black

families; the black characters of the film are always shown as suffering, crying and being torn from each other by the whites. The filming of those scenes was very strategic, and it does give us a sense of how much easier and more privileged (generally) the lives of whites were during apartheid (The Reel World, pg. 2).

I grew much more intellectually than I had ever anticipated. As mentioned, realizing the interconnectedness of our planet through time and space has been an incredible revelation. The study of history in particular provided a wonderful understanding to how we have progressed to our modern world today. Through classes such as “The Global Economy,” I now have a more comprehensive knowledge of how currency and trade is conducted on a worldwide level, which is especially helpful to me because I am now a permanent resident of Australia. My understanding of cultural differences has dramatically increased, along with being respectful of those differences. I was able to learn about other cultures through not-so-obvious means, such as studying what fine art can teach us about a culture (Global Arts). This has been beneficial as culture is a passion of mine on both a personal and professional level. I believe my interest in the subject matter is reflected in my 3.78 GPA—the highest GPA I have ever earned in my academic career. For someone who wasn’t even sure if I’d make it through community college, it is an absolute wonder that I am now applying for PhD programs.

Surprisingly, this program affected my spirituality for the better. I think among the Christian community there is a small, unspoken fear of science and intellectual study because of the common misconception that it will replace pockets of spirituality. With this degree, I did not find that to be the case. Both for and against arguments about Christianity presented to me during this program allowed me to seriously contemplate how I perceived my own religion. I began to actually enjoy hearing the flaws of Christianity so that I could be aware of the problems--not be another ignorant member of society--but be able to do something to fix the problem.

This program grew my ability to explain why I believe in the things that I do and how to better present those beliefs to other people. I am grateful for the opportunity I had to study other religious denominations, to respect them, and know that the church I belong to—The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints--is truly the one for me. I didn’t have to give up my beliefs to understand the curriculum; I had to *strengthen* them in order to weave a coherent understanding of the world together. In the course “Religion and Ecology” I have summed up this very feeling:

So, in my head, I am going to change the meaning of Genesis 1: 26. To me, it will now read, “And God said, Let us make man in our image, after our likeness: and let them use their dominion **for good** over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over the cattle, **and spread their love and respect for the gifts I have given them over all the earth**, and over every creeping thing that creepeth upon the earth.

I may not feel like my entire perspective of the human relationship with

the environment has necessarily changed, but my awareness of the issues and understanding of solutions has greatly increased. Studying the valid claims that Christians in particular hold an ignorant view of the planet didn't make me want to change my religion, but rather think about the meaning of my beliefs on a much deeper level and decide how I personally will interpret them. Each reference to the impact of religion on nature also grew my desire to spread ideas of change throughout my religious community. I may not be running around with "Save the Planet" signs on Sundays, but I can certainly incorporate the things I've learned into the two weekly lessons I teach to all teenagers aged 12-18 (Religion & Ecology, pg. 11-12).

I am so grateful I enrolled in this program. It was not a technical degree that now qualifies me for anything in particular, but it has better qualified for life in general. I can be a better learner, teacher, member of my church, wife, employee and not only an American citizen, but a *global* citizen. I am not just a person of one nation now, I am a part of the world as a whole—a world that I more fully understand and appreciate.

## Works Cited

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