

**The Acceptance of Diversity and Why It is Important**

By Gail Walker

UNCG MALS Reflection Essay

April 7, 2015

The last twenty plus years I have worked in the operating room at the University of North Carolina in Chapel Hill. One of the most satisfying aspects of my work is the daily interactions I have with people from all over the world. I have noticed that people with a strong faith in some type of higher power seem to cope with this incredibly stressful environment better than those that believe in nothing. There is no science behind my observation; it is merely years of experience speaking. During my time in the MALS program I found myself drifting towards, and most enjoying, classes that dealt with how people's world views are shaped, the outside influences that are responsible for these views and how these groups choose to represent themselves.

I grew up in a household where reading was encouraged and, be it right or wrong, little oversight was given to my choice of reading material. I feel as though I started my liberal arts education at about the age of eight. Ayn Rand and Norman Mailer could be considered odd choices for a child in fourth grade but, having grown up in a big, Irish Catholic neighborhood, those books gave me my first taste of the fact that not all people were like me. Even today, at the age of 57, I'm still surprised how people can treat each other and I found myself looking for answers in the MALS program.

The class *In Search of the Church* had a great impact on me. Having attended Catholic school for eight years, I had a strong foundation in Catholicism but I found out what the nuns taught me was a faith based version of the religion. According to them the Bible was the word of God and it was to be obeyed. Period. I really had no reason to question the fact that the Church had my best interest at heart until I, as an unwed mother, asked that my daughter be baptized and

was denied. This was over thirty five years ago but, looking back now, I can see this is where I started looking at religion in a different light. Professor Ruzicka was adamant that the class be viewed in the context of history and not as an attempt to convert, defend or condemn. Some students struggled with this concept but, for me, it stripped away the faith that the nuns demanded I view Christianity with and presented me bare bones facts that allowed me to come to my own conclusions. The mistakes, gross injustices, greed and sex that were all part of the Christian Church's evolution were introduced to me for the first time and made the Church human instead of infallible and not something that people should blindly follow all in the name of faith.

Terrorism is another topic that is front and center every single day. I pretty much viewed terrorism the same way Supreme Court Justice Potter Stewart defined pornography, "I know it when I see it" but Professor Levesque showed me that that is not always the case. Beheading journalists, raping children and randomly killing people is clearly terrorism but other acts of violence aren't as easy to define. The class was given different case scenarios and asked whether specific violent acts could be justified. I was surprised how I struggled to answer some of the questions because what we see on the surface is often not the reality that people are living. The fact that the United Nations cannot even come up with a definition for terrorism was, to me, troubling. How can an ethnic group that is the victim of genocide be considered a terrorist organization when they fight back? I now realize there is a difference between a freedom fighter and a terrorist but political rhetoric often blurs the line.

Many of the classes that seemed to draw me in were the ones that were relevant to today's issues and problems. Hardly a day goes by that Boko Haram is not mentioned for their acts of extreme violence. In April 2014, Boko Haram kidnapped 276 female students from a boarding school in Borno. The world was up in arms over this situation but, like many stories of this kind, eventually faded from public view when new atrocities occurred. One of the papers I wrote had to do with the originals of these groups and how they came to be. I could not fathom how kidnapping children would further their cause but, again, came to understand that this was a situation where the ends seemed to justify the means. Dealing with issues such as child prostitution in Thailand, ecologically decimating the rainforest and the conditions at Guantanamo Bay were tackled head-on. The result of these in-depth looks often left me wondering how people could justify their actions when the devastation was immediate and right in front of them. I have always liked to think of myself as a problem solver. Just given the right information and drive, anything wrong can be righted; any injustice can be corrected but this class reminded me this is not the case.

One of the biggest lessons I learned during my MALS was to stop using my Western values and applying those values to other societies. I have already spoken about how fortunate I am to work with such a diverse group of people but am now more aware of why others hold the beliefs, attitudes or practice the customs they do. Shortly after 9/11 I started speaking with one of our Muslim doctors about what had prompted the attack, how he was treated and his views on many different things. For weeks after the attack he, and many other Muslims at UNC, had to be escorted to and from their vehicles because the atmosphere was so tense and the threats they were receiving as a result of the attack. Some of the personal stories he told me made me

ashamed that our society was persecuting him and others of the Muslim community. I went out and bought a paperback copy of the Koran in order to get a better understanding of his beliefs. When I told him what I had done, he went out and bought me a beautifully leather bound copy of the Koran. He was so touched that someone had reached out to him during this time that he wanted me to be reading a copy that he knew had been translated correctly. He left UNC shortly thereafter but he is another reason I took classes that dealt with religion, terrorism, and different cultures.

Films were also used in many of the classes and they were often foreign films. I initially thought, “oh no, not subtitles” but was pleasantly surprised by the quality of the films and the impact they had on me. I had never viewed James Bond as a misogynist before but now realize he is one. This is important because of the message this sends and maddening because it is embraced by Western society. Another was a cartoon which put Muslims and all people from the Middle East in a very bad light by using stereotypes. As a child of the 60’s I recognized some of these cartoons and was disturbed that these stereotypes were never challenged until later. The women’s movement and the civil rights movement helped put an end to the blind acceptance of these stereotypes. The final thing I noticed was the family dynamics in some of these films. No matter the culture, the language or country the family unit was of primary importance. The contrast was striking in some cases between how close and interconnected they are compared to families in the United States where the family unit has been taking a beating these last decades.

*Simple Living in a Complex Age* brought many uncomfortable truths to the forefront but the upside was that it forced me to take a hard look at myself and the role I played. The one thing

I noticed was how normal our “throw away” society has become and the fact that it does not have to be that way nor can it continue to be that way. It also made me realize our government has failed us terribly because politicians have a tendency to do what is best for their careers and other issues are secondary.

The quote by Carl Sagan, “I don't want to believe, I want to know” is one that has stuck with me for many years. The MALS program has helped to broaden my reading choices, guided me towards new experiences and shown me that learning is a lifelong process. I purposely chose classes that would not only challenge my beliefs but would make me justify them. While I may no longer be in a classroom setting, I am confident that I will continue to question and challenge not only myself but the world around me. Learning is a lifetime process but one that must be pursued. For me, passivity is worse than ignorance because now I know better.