

Many months ago, Dr. Martin Forward and I were sitting in a café in Aurora having breakfast with two Turks. They were, admittedly, the first Turks that I had met. Their names were Kemal Oksuz and Hakan Berberoglu, and they were, respectively, the Executive Director and the Associate Director of the Niagara Foundation, a non-profit organization in Chicago dedicated to broadening inter-religious and intercultural dialogue through lectures, meals, and shared values. One of their biggest projects involves sending groups of community leaders (both secular and religious) to Turkey, in an effort to show that it is a rapidly modernizing, friendly, and quite European nation. These fellows made a great first impression. At one point, Kemal mentioned sending a group of Aurora University students to Turkey some time in the near future. I thought that would be pretty nice. A few months later, as the friendship between the Niagara Foundation and the Wackerlin Center for Faith and Action matured, the Values Council was officially invited to take part in an excursion to the “hinge of East and West” to hang out for a few days and see the sights, meet the people, and eat, eat, eat. We took them up on the offer.

And so, after months of planning and worrying, we were finally on our way to Istanbul. The “we” warrants an explanation, of course. “We” were Dr. Martin Forward, Executive Director of the Wackerlin Center for Faith and Action; Jason Lemberg, an employee in the University’s Advisement Department and a good friend of the CFA; Tim Brauhn, 06-07 Wackerlin Fellow; and Steven Binns, Erin Kwiatkowski, and Lex Degurian, all seniors of the Aurora University Class of ’07. We were a good group, too, and I couldn’t think of a better bunch of people to travel with. They are all dear friends, and only made dearer by way of our time in Turkey.

We met up with Hakan, who would be our tour guide, and his parents (lovely people) at the airport and headed out into the city. As we drove, I realized that the minibus we were in wasn’t just a minibus, it was a *Turkish* minibus, and therefore more deserving of my attention. A patch of flowers on the side of the road was now a patch of *Turkish* flowers. I think I actually took a picture of a bulldozer, not because I am particularly enamored of bulldozers, but because it was a special, *Turkish* bulldozer. I am easily amused, I suppose, by things outside of the American experience; Turkey, geographically, is very far outside. Thusly, I am amused by it. We were cruising through Istanbul as the sun was beginning to set. It made our welcome all the more special. After checking into the hotel, we were off again to our first dinner in Turkey. It was also the first real food we had had since leaving Illinois. This is not to say that airplane food is not real, but to point out that it never tastes like what the actual version of the food should. I used to think it impossible to screw up cantaloupe, but airlines just have a way with food that makes me wonder. We found out during that first meal that in Turkey that the phrase, “No, thank you, I’m stuffed to the gills.” means absolutely nothing. If anything, it is a signal that you should probably eat more. So we waddled back to the minibus to head to the hotel.

There was a mosque across the street from my hotel room window, and as Steven and I watched the scene outside, the azaan rang out from its minaret. The azaan is the call to prayer for Muslims. This particular azaan was signaling the last prayer of the day. As I heard the strange words lilting out into the night air, I suddenly realized that I was very, very far from home. But instead of being concerned, I was consoled somehow by the knowledge that I recognized my disconnection from my apartment in Montgomery. Steve and I stood there and listened to the whole thing, silent as statues. Neither of us were

Muslims, but we recognized the importance of such a thing, and respected it as such. I didn't sleep much that first night.

We saw lots of sights that next day, including the Blue Mosque and the Grand Bazaar, one of the world's largest covered markets. It has 4,000 shops! We went through the Hagia Sophia, one of early Christianity's wonder-churches. When the Pilgrims landed at Plymouth Rock, the Church of the Holy Wisdom was a very, very old building. It's a beautiful thing, and it now serves as a museum, housing fabulous mosaics of the Pantocrator Christ and John the Baptist. It is home to some of the most famous icons of Orthodox Christianity. It was converted to a mosque after the Muslim conquest of Constantinople, but when the Turkish Republic was formed, it was thought that it would better serve to illuminate the shared religious history of the nation. Walking through doorways that Emperors and Sultans had traversed made me feel the great weight of history, and nearly put me into a spin. It was strange looking up at the giant medallions with the names of Allah, Muhammad and the old Caliphs. I had seen pictures of the inside of the place for many years, and actually standing in it was a real treat.

Speaking of treats, the next morning we woke at 4 am to visit the Eyup Sultan Mosque. That is very, very early when you're still trying to adjust from international travel with little sleep. After the morning prayers, we walked to a portion of the mosque that serves as a tomb for, who else, Eyup Sultan. Eyup was one of the Companions of the Prophet Muhammad, sort of analogous to the Apostles. As we were standing, the worshippers filed out to stand in front of the tomb and offer prayers. It was obvious we weren't Muslims, but it didn't seem to bother them. They stood shoulder-to-shoulder with us and prayed. After that, a lovely professor invited us to his home for coffee. He didn't know us, but he felt it necessary to host. So we went. He gave us coffee and tea and brought his students in to sing a song for us. Very nice stuff. It was our first real taste of "Turkish hospitality," a mystical thing that has to be experienced to be fully understood. In Turkey, guests are considered gifts from God, and are treated accordingly. Historically, cultures that were once nomadic (as the Turks used to be), treat guests quite well. This aspect of Turkish culture is still strong. As we were leaving, I thanked the professor for his food and hospitality. I did this in Turkish, an absolutely fascinating language. His face lit up like a jack o' lantern. He smiled and hugged me and said, "My friend speaks a little Turkish!" We laughed together, this nice little professor and I, and he called me friend. This was not the first time this happened, and it would not be the last.

That night, after another FULL day of sightseeing, we were welcomed into a home in Istanbul. The family didn't know Hakan, and they certainly didn't know any of us, but they had heard that we were coming and asked if they could "rent our tooth" for the night. That's the expression they use. So they fed us until we couldn't hold any more, then we sat down to talk about things. It was nice; just chilling out in their modest apartment. We had tea, and we explained, with Hakan translating, what we did and what we studied in school. Education is very important in Turkey, and I will speak to this later. They were wonderful folks, and I could tell that were actually proud to have us in their home. This, in turn, made us feel very good. Erin, by dint of her being the only female in our group, was treated very, very well by the lady of the house, who took it upon herself to "adopt" her as a new daughter. This happened a few times, and I don't think Erin minded much. As we left, we were given some pairs of socks as gifts. Now normally, gift

socks don't do much for me, but these were special socks suited to warm climates, and our host happened to be the exporter of something like 40% of Turkey's socks. It was a little odd: Total strangers, welcomed into a home and fed to capacity, then given gifts when they leave? I shouldn't say odd, then; perhaps, unexpected? I'm just not used to that kind of treatment. In Turkey, it is expected that the hosts will do this.

We flew down to the Aegean Coast the next day, and spent some fabulous time at Ephesus, which is a very, very old place. It was wonderful. I took many pictures there, including a few of the Ephesian Amphitheatre. I stood on its stage and whispered, "Beloved..." It was the only word I could think of. St. Paul's journeys took him to that very spot to spread the word of the Christ. That means something to a guy who enjoys the beauty of form and message of hope that the Pauline letters contain. We left Ephesus and headed up a mountain along some very steep roads to what in Turkish is called Maryamana. We knew it as the House of the Virgin Mary, and tradition holds that it was the final resting place of Jesus' mother. The name Maryamana translates as "dear Mother Mary," and in fact the "ana" part of the word is the most polite form of referring to one's own mother in the language. It is an important Christian pilgrimage site, but it also sees its fair share of Muslims, too. The Virgin Mary is revered in Islam, since she did give birth to a prophet. She actually has her own chapter in the Qur'an. We had to walk a ways to get to the actual site. It was a tiny little house, rebuilt some years ago from an old foundation. It was guarded by a very old monk. The interior had a number of different pictures of Mary along one wall, with some candles, too. I said a silent prayer, although my mind was spinning at the time. Something tells me a "Hail Mary" would have done the trick, but I just couldn't pull the words out of the confusion in my head. Was I standing in the same spot where Mary had been? As a Roman Catholic who grew up with John Paul II, Mary had always been an important figure in my faith-life. It was all very powerful. As I stepped out into the sunlight, my eyes full of water, I still found it hard to express what I was feeling. I was speaking with Hakan and saying, "I...I..." There were no words, and I'm usually not one to not speak. We had received white Turkey Turizm hats earlier in the day, and Hakan's mother Afet instructed me to put mine on. Then she called me a hajji, which is the term for a Muslim who has gone to Mecca on Hajj. She was calling me a pilgrim. Fine then; a pilgrim I was. When we left Maryamana, my head was still spinning.

That night, I got a close shave at a Turkish berber (barber) after a fine meal of Southeastern Turkish cuisine. We walked through the streets of Kusadasi. It was one of those strange "golden nights," where the temperature is perfect, your company grand, and simply walking forward is a pleasurable experience. The next day was a sort of day off, and we spent our time swimming in the Aegean Sea and playing proper football. We slept well that night. The next stop was Denizli, which is about 200 miles east of the coast. We were heading into Anatolia, and the landscape changed just as surely as driving from the Great Plains into the Appalachians. This is not to say that the land is necessarily hilly, but the differences in climate and geography were obvious. Denizli is the nearest large city to the ruins of Hierapolis, the "City of the Priests," a massive grouping of old temples, theatres, tombs and homes. Hierapolis is sort of everywhere, and you can't avoid it by looking in the other direction. The site sits on top of a massive calcium waterfall called Pamukkale, or "Cotton Castle" in English. It's a very strange place, and the weather was noticeably hotter than on the coast or in Istanbul. 95 degrees in Chicagoland means that

the humidity is slowly killing you. 95 degrees in Anatolia is much dryer, and somewhat tolerable. Needless to say, I would have enjoyed a shower. But we had to get to dinner.

We traveled into Denizli to the home of a teacher whose name escapes me now. He and his wife and children had turned their living room into a banquet hall, and we ate very well there. A retreat to the balcony for laughs and coffee followed. Erin was again adopted by the family, and they actually let her serve the Turkish coffee to the whole group. The group included our regular Turkey trippers and our hosts. But there were also six or seven other people who had sort of “tagged along” for the meal. One of them was the owner of the restaurant where we had eaten lunch. Others were university teachers. Even now, most of their names escape me. I remember Kadir, because he stole some of my ice cream. I remember Sinan because he enjoyed my attempts at speaking Turkish. Kirim was hard to forget, as he had a sort of blustery personality. I do remember their faces, though. Smiling, happy faces. I was very happy on that balcony with my new Turkish friends, and I think I probably could have stayed there indefinitely.

We went back inside and talked about what we had seen and what we were going to see during our remaining time in Turkey. Our host and hostess made impassioned speeches about how honored they were to welcome us into their home. I could tell the speeches were impassioned because they were both crying as they spoke. This, in turn, made it very difficult for others to maintain their composure. There I was, sitting in a room full of dear friends and even dearer strangers. In typical English-major fashion, I will say that the gratitude in the room was palpable. I feel silly for not understanding until that evening what the point of Turkish hospitality is about. It’s about welcoming the stranger. In that apartment, we were definitely strangers, but it didn’t seem to matter. For instance, Dr. Forward, a Methodist minister, was asked to deliver a prayer at the beginning of the meal. With the exception of our group, everyone in the apartment was Muslim. They valued the prayer as much as one of their own. We didn’t even speak the same language, and in fact our lovely host and hostess didn’t know any English short of saying “Thank you.” In Turkey, I found myself saying “thank you” so often that it became a sort of short prayer in and of itself. My dear friends in Denizli showed me what I think I needed to see about Turkey: it is hard to allow oneself to be loved completely by a stranger for no apparent reason. In Turkey, it comes from the culture and the way that Islam has become an inseparable part of that culture. The time I spent with those complete strangers, complete loving strangers, became a highlight of my trip. Occasionally it’s the little things that make the biggest impression.

The long drive from Denizli to Konya exposed me to sights that I have never experienced. Having toured the United States very limitedly, my knowledge of “vast” stretches of beautiful land is somewhat, limited. Now I’ll have to compare the Rockies to what I saw on the way into central Anatolia. Konya is the home of Rumi, the great 13th century Sufi Muslim poet whose Whirling Dervishes are still spinning towards perfection. I had an opportunity through Niagara Foundation to see the Whirling Dervishes the last time they came to Chicago, and visiting their home-place was a sort of return for me, as after seeing them I desperately wanted to explore their origin. Konya held Rumi’s tomb, and it was special to see the resting place of the man whose poetry has touched me so. Konya gave way to Cappadocia, and the underground cities and mountaintop castles of early Christian communities.

A flight from Kayseri brought us back to an Istanbul that seemed to know we were leaving the country. At the end of a great trip, even the environment seems to weigh down on one's time. Not in a bad way, mind you, but those attuned to trees can feel it. Foreboding and loss, albeit in a shiny package of remembrance. We walked through gardens of roses and looked at the city during sunset. Anywhere in Istanbul is a perfect view.

Our last day in Turkey was spent at Fatih University, which is strangely similar to Aurora University; large commuter population, 500 on-campus residents, comparable enrollment, rapidly expanding, and RED TILE ROOFS! Fatih was fun, and faculty from the departments of Political Science and English Studies gave us a very nice tour, and some fancy mugs. We had spent the entire trip visiting elementary, middle and high schools, but Fatih University was the first college we had stopped at. Those other schools we had visited were associated with the Gülen Movement in Turkey, a comprehensive worldview founded upon the writings and teachings of the great Muslim scholar Fethullah Gülen. The Movement stresses education, since without it, we aren't capable of changing the world. The part about it that I really enjoy is the emphasis on dialogue as a part of that education. The Gülen schools we visited were full of students who were voraciously curious of our group, as we were from a very far away place. Questions, questions, questions... Students, while learning about the world they live in, also interact with the people that live in that world, a point that is sadly missing in many other educational systems. We met an exchange student from Mexico, too. He was learning Turkish; not necessarily because he needed it, but because he thought it would be a good idea. I've got a good feeling about the Gülen Movement, and I think it's working to produce a generation of very intelligent, very informed young people who are going to have a keen desire to improve the world in which they live. Not to mention the fact that the cafeteria food at Gülen schools is very, very edible.

From Fatih University we headed to the airport, where we said our goodbyes to Hakan and his parents, Cengizhan and Afet. We were sorry to leave them. In 10 short days, Afet had become a mother to all of us, and Cengizhan had taught me enough Turkish to survive quite adequately in Central Anatolia. Leaving Turkey was tough, and I hope to be able to return again soon.

Someone asked me after my return what the trip was like. I gave them this nugget: "There are a lot of people in Turkey that don't know you, but they love you, and they hope to meet you soon." That's probably the best way for me to describe how the place works. The Turks are a welcoming people, and their version of hospitality is one that I could definitely get used to. We were treated like royalty everywhere we went, or at least what amounts to royal treatment in my head. And the soup is magnificent.

Further reflection brought about an understanding of the role of religion in a modern, Islamic, mostly-European secular nation like Turkey. Living in a place where Christianity has dominated for so long had dulled me to the overt ways in which Americans live out their religion. The people we met in Turkey didn't think it odd at all to excuse themselves at a moment's notice to go to another room and pray. The frequent blessings and prayers that we heard became a sort of background noise to what was going on around me. Islam has permeated the culture in such a way that even in a secular state like Turkey, one's religion is a constant part of life. In Turkey, faith just happens.

I return to the States with a more rounded conception of what the other side of the world is like, and the heights to which one's soul can sail in that beautiful, foreign land. Turkey's people and places have captured my heart, and I highly doubt and sincerely hope that they won't let go anytime soon.