

When I started my Master's program in Conflict Resolution last fall, I never could have known how much more real and relevant what I was studying would soon become. The fall of 2015 marked the beginning of an onslaught and increased awareness of Islamic violence abroad – claimed as such by both the perpetrators and the larger world – and a steady series of anti-Islamic rhetoric and violence at home. Even after 9/11, I had never felt the kind of polarization and hostility that fuels both of these trajectories that we have witnessed and experienced in the past year.

The murders of Khalid Jabara in Oklahoma and of Maulama Akonjee and Thara Uddin in New York – Muslims in America who were living their lives just the way you and I do – are just the most recent targets of this xenophobia, signifying how far we've fallen into these dark voids of prejudice, violence, and fear, and how far away we are from where we could be.

I have sometimes hesitated to write much about these national and international affairs, in part because the particular details, greater depth, and long-term implications of what is happening surpasses what I can presently claim to speak to knowledgeably. But what I can speak to is a possibility for a better world, one that is not merely void of violent conflict but is instead filled with peace and friendship in its wake – one that I am fortunate in more ways than I realize to have experienced this past summer.

The Hansen Summer Institute brings together 25 young, peace-aspiring leaders from 20 different countries to what was described to us as the world's greatest city of San Diego, for the purpose of exploring international cooperation and leadership, studying social entrepreneurship, and – most importantly – building a unified community amid diversity.

Here, I witnessed the beautiful connections that can be forged when individuals hailing from countries in conflict with one another are roommates and choose to engage with one another with friendship, curiosity, and an open heart: when an Indian and a Pakistani playfully joke and tease with one another; when a Turkish and an Armenian spend hours late into the night talking about all that life entails and throws at them; when a Bosnian looks after and cares for his ill, Serbian roommate; when the personalities of an Estonian and a Russian resonate and equilibrate with one another so beautifully and naturally; when a Palestinian and an Israeli civilly and respectfully discuss what they agree and disagree about – and when all of them still walk onward as closer friends.

Never again can I look upon a map of the world and feel unaffected by international events, nor can I read about the politics involving these countries in the same way ever again. A fellow American participant shared how he has added these 20 countries to his personalized, daily news feed for this same reason. All of our minds and our hearts have been opened to these countries through knowing and living with one another, and I cannot envision them ever closing off even as our countries may continue to rage with one another. I do not believe it possible for any of us to envision peace for ourselves and our countries without ensuring it for the other, after all that we experienced with and through one another.

I've found a lifelong friendship in someone from a country that I barely knew existed and who has become a closer friend to me in less than two months than many friends I've known since my

childhood. I recently confided to her a dilemma I've been struggling with, and she responded by asking, "how are we going to fix this?" Can you imagine an internationally connected world in which our leaders ask and answer this question with one another and for one another, together? In my mind, this possibility no longer feels out of reach for our world as it once felt to me.

It was amid such a diverse community with each and every one of my fellow Hansen participants and amid our commitment to one another that I have felt the most free and uninhibited in being and expressing who I am, all the while knowing that their love and respect remains amid all the different pieces of myself so open and vulnerable. They are why I still have hope amid all of the international conflicts and violence plaguing our world and the subsequent, interpersonal prejudice and hostility that is born out of that.

None of this is meant to suggest that there are not real conflicts that plague these countries, that there is not significant disagreement, nor that there is not immense suffering as a result of them. Indeed, we grappled with these realities as well during our three weeks together. Rather, the implied message is that we choose how to relate and engage with one another amid those conflicts, real and painful as they are.

There are three specific items that I believe allowed this experience to play out as beautifully as it did, as it was designed and envisioned by the directors and funders. The first is that all of our needs were taken care of properly and holistically, both physical and emotional. We did not have to worry about where our food was coming from for our next meal, or whether we were safe from danger while sleeping at night. Having our physical, tangible needs met is an imperative for this kind of engagement. Second, we each entered into the program and into relationship with one another with a commitment to upholding respect and with an intention to build our community, and we remained steadfast and true to that and to one another amid conflicts and disagreements that arose. Without this, we would not have maintained the friendly, supportive contact we have still today. Third, we held a shared identity and common purpose as fellows of the Hansen Institute, not at all unlike how each of us is a global citizen of our world.

In the midst of a phase of struggling in my own Islamic faith, my fellow Hansen participants have given me a new kind of faith. Amid losing the home of my upbringing in a family tragedy, I have gained 24 new homes across the world. I suspect that I likely will not be able to visit home as often as I'd like; but home is, in part, defined by the trust that should we ever need to go home amid whatever else happens in the world and in our lives, it will remain there for us – patient, eager, and overjoyed to welcome us back.

My international Hansen family reminds me of what I stand for – a unity amid diversity – and they remind me why I stand for that: relationships like those we have – across the lines of difference that are so often incited and used to divide rather than unite – are what heals the wounds of our hearts, inspires hope for something greater and better for us all, and brings us ever closer to achieving the dream of peace within our inner worlds and the larger world we share. I am comforted, inspired, and made hopeful knowing that each of them is acting so courageously, compassionately, and beautifully in the world, and I know that our entire world will also be comforted, inspired, and made hopeful as we reach further and rise higher in our peacebuilding efforts.

I often receive a mix of responses when I share with others what I study and what I aspire towards, including: “we need more of that”; “thank you for committing yourself to this”; “good luck”; “you’re going to be busy”; “you’ll never be out of a job.” Truthfully, more often than not, I feel just as uncertain and overwhelmed as those who place their hope in me, and I wish I could give more of the answers that are sought. The most I can offer here, now, is the truth and beauty of our Hansen experience that exists as a possibility for us all, and my conviction that we together validated: that how we choose to engage with those different from us – and it is a choice, always – is our own free, individual choice, but that fate is shared by us all.

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