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Mark Twain is known to have said that, "travel is fatal to prejudice, bigotry and narrow-mindedness." To travel means that one tears down the barriers across cultures to instate a bridge of peace and understanding. Coming to the US has greatly influenced the way I perceive the world.

My perspective on the world has gradually changed since my family and I arrived to the United States on a July day in 2009 coming from Baghdad, Iraq. I was age seventeen and I was still in high school. Living in a war-ridden county in the Middle East, I held different views and beliefs. Some of these were mere leftovers from a recently toppled dictatorship and some were ideas formed out of fear, sectarian anxiety and misguidance. Having said that, I must mention that these positions did not represent my inner character or my real identity. They were practically a survival kit so as not to appear weak in that chaotic setting. Nonetheless, my core identity was sculpted by my parents whose education and literacy were vital in keeping me in accord with my surroundings.

In coming to the US, I saw a distinctive kind of environment, one that is much different than my native one. We, as immigrants, had to adjust. We sought to become part of this social fabric. A fabric so diverse, it earned the title "Melting Pot"

Hopeful for a long life in the US, I started to explore the culture. Visits to our American neighbors in High Point, NC, exposed us to the different ideas and ambitions of average American families. However, my real journey in American society started when I attended a semester at Guilford County Dorris Henderson Newcomers School, a transitional school for immigrant students. Its mission was to help newcomers learn English and adapt to the new culture. The school was a "miniature" America. We had students from every corner of the globe. They held different ideas, beliefs and practices. Some of which I have never seen nor heard of

before. It was honestly a very enriching experience. Most importantly, I formed my first friendships in the US at this school. They were not only Iraqis but they were from the Democratic Republic of Congo, Germany, Jordan and Saudi Arabia. Some of them embraced absolutely dissimilar views yet shared my longing for peace and harmony in the world.

When my siblings and I transitioned to American high school –specifically Southwest Guilford High School-, we learned more about the US. I remember being amazed at the amount of diversity within the culture. I never thought the US to have such wide spectrum of people. More inspiring was the spirit of sportsmanship, school pride and rivalry between the different local schools, something we never had back home.

I must admit that it was harder to form friendships at Southwest High because everyone knew each other from as far back as elementary school. But I was still able to make very good friends by the time I graduated in 2011. During these three semesters, I learned much of the American values such as teamwork, volunteerism, sportsmanship, punctuality, and tolerance.

I hung out with youth my age from different ethnicities and backgrounds; went camping in the mountains with youth groups. We learned about each other through soccer, basketball, hiking and swimming. I recognized I share the same interests as they do even when we were raised at different parts of the world. We had different native tongues but we spoke for the same principles. We had different complexions but our mind held the similar ideals. We were physically different but looked homogenous in our ambitions and dreams. We all wanted peace.

So as to learn about this culture's original foundation, I attended a church. It was an invitation by family friends. Truth to be said, I was hesitant in the beginning for I've never been to a church before. I had to consider every aspect of it before deciding to go. I was concerned that it would affect my belief system and my faith. Eventually, I chose to go.

People there were filled with warmth, friendliness and welcomed me kindly. It was an eye-opening visit that presented me the basics of the Christian belief. The little conversations I had, provided me with a good insight of the Christian faith. It also allowed me to present some of the basic concepts of Islam. So they were more of small seminars than conversations. The conversations led to lunch gatherings and sports activities and finally great friendships. Every now and then, whenever I return to High Point, I go out with my friends from church for a dinner or a movie. Such bonding that transcends differences makes peace more attainable.

Personally and reflecting on my ideas before coming to the US, I never thought that I would become good friends with people who held beliefs different than mine. I come to realize that living in a homogenous culture such as that of Iraq, which has a majority of Muslim Arabs, one becomes resistant to any other alien ideology.

I am now fully aware of the propaganda that was sponsored by contending parties and insurgent militias, which promoted hate towards the west and towards neighboring regional countries like Saudi Arabia, Iran, Kuwait and Jordan. Many Iraqis unfortunately, still believe it. They also don't realize that the average American is peaceful and kind. Thus the status quo becomes too sacred to change and the community becomes more vulnerable to xenophobia and intolerance.

It's rather ironic that my Middle Eastern friends and I had to travel half the way around the world to realize how much we have in common. It is fate's funny way to show how travel is vital to the harmony of civilizations.

America is indeed a melting pot and a window to the world. Therefore, I know that I am my journey isn't over and that my perspectives will continue to develop, as I know more people and cultures.