

I stood on the roof—overlooking the mosques, houses, and serpentine alleyways—of the medina, the old city, of Fes. The sulfuric smell of burning hair brought to my nose by the brisk November wind, the river of blood on the roof terrace, and the sharp gasping as the ram took his last breath overwhelmed me. I never had much of a stomach for blood yet, here I was, in Morocco, miles from home, seeing rams sacrificed. I was not only watching my home-stay uncles and cousins stand in a puddle of blood up to their ankles as they pumped up each animal with air using a bicycle pump, no, I was taking an active role as the “leg-and-head skinner” girl. My eyes stung as I bent over the crackling fire to continue grilling and scrapping off the hair on the ram's head, realizing how much my actions (or rather reactions) and thoughts had changed in the past months. A smile flashed on my face to think of how my friends and family would react when I described this upon my return home. Killing farm animals on roof terraces in one's pajamas was not done often in America.

This “sheep fiesta,” as my home-stay uncle had so uniquely put it, was an annual holiday in Muslim countries where God is remembered and asked for forgiveness by sacrificing an animal. The holiday, Eid l’Kbir, is based on the story in the Old Testament in which Abraham agrees to follow through with the visions he is having of sacrificing his son to God. At the last moment, however, God sends Abraham a ram as a replacement. It was also a time for families to come together, which meant that there were over twenty family members squeezing next to each other at meals, trying to fit everyone on the couches, and staying up late in the night playing games, and I was among it all. After almost two months in Fes, Morocco, I knew how to successfully

maneuver the medina's alleyways. I had already learned how to communicate in Darija, the Moroccan Arabic dialect, and my bargaining skills made my home-stay family proud. I had camped under the stars in the Sahara desert, trekked through the Atlas Mountains, and attended a wedding for one of my Moroccan teachers. I had not merely experienced Moroccan culture, but embraced it. However, participating in the sacrifice was the turning point of my experiences in Morocco. No longer was I a traveler in a foreign country; instead the foreign country had become my new home.

From the moment I stepped off the plane in Casablanca and saw the towering, tiled mosques and heard the call to prayer that startled me out of my thoughts, I knew that the next three months would be like nothing I had ever known. I walked through the souks, the timeless covered markets, and was transported from modern times to an age long lost to most of the world. There, the meat is thrown on the white tiled counter with nothing between; the vegetables are piled high and weighed on a scale that looks like it has been used for centuries; the chickens are live and squawking in their cages; and there are cats all about scavenging their meals from the butcher. Each day, friends and strangers questioned me about my life at home, my religion, and American culture. In return, I questioned my friend's religions, their country's different social conditions, and the culture surrounding me. My six weeks living with my home-stay family in Fes, along with my week of living with families in the High Atlas Mountains, allowed me to directly experience Moroccan culture and, more importantly, gave me a deep and personal understanding of Islam—one of the best gifts I have brought back with me. My trip helped me realize that there is no difference between people's economic standing,

religion, race, or language that is strong enough to outweigh the one fundamental commonality that we all share: we are all human beings.

There is no doubt that my time in Morocco changed me in countless ways. However, Morocco was not the foundation of my appreciation of diversity. For eight years I attended a Quaker school, where I was taught to value the beliefs and customs of others, even when I did not share or understand them. Essentially, I was taught to seek the “inner light” within each individual. My childhood was marked by significant experiences, such as hosting exchange students from Russia and France, traveling to Europe to help my dad with work, and going to Ecuador for three weeks, where I first encountered how the majority of the world lives. These early encounters with diversity taught me to not avoid the challenge of experiencing foreign cultures. I now search for a college where diversity will be prominent. I do not want a homogeneous campus, because I know that facing something or someone unfamiliar, though difficult, is also necessary. The opportunity to experience unfamiliar cultures is the most beneficial experience for one's intellectual and personal development.

As I boarded the ferry to Spain, the call to prayer faintly reached my ears, and I was startled yet again out of my thoughts. However, unlike before, I was not startled because of the chilling noise. Rather, I was startled because of how familiar and beautiful it sounded. No longer was this a sound of foreign thought and religion—foreign customs or people. Now it reminded me of how much I understand Islam and how many of my new friends answer to this call.