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Lessons from Reka

“If you’re happy and you know it, clap your hands!”
“Shi-awase nara tewo tatako!”
“Kalau kau suka hati, dan sungguh dapat itu,”
“If you’re happy and you know it, clap your hands!”

One night last semester in Australia, four young women sat out on a balcony singing this song over and over. We had discovered that our languages shared a common children’s song and we were thrilled. One phrase would be sung in English, one in Japanese and one in Javanese, with the final phrase being sung simultaneously in English, our common language. This is one of my fondest memories of my friends in Australia.

I spent my semester with three of the most amazing young women I have ever met. Arlene was my roommate and a fellow St. Mary’s student. Arisa was a young Japanese woman, starting her first semester at The University of Notre Dame AU. Reka was from Indonesia and was starting her final year with a semester abroad. Within the first week of school, we bonded over pizza and afterwards, spent the majority of our time together, laughing and learning. During that semester, I learned the most important lessons from spending time with those girls, and especially Reka. The lessons I learned from her could not be acquired in any single class. Through our discussions, interaction and recreation I received instruction in the religion of Islam, international relations, critical thinking and the potential that exists within a strong young woman.

Lesson 1: A lesson in Islam

In Universities where religion and theology are valued, a class in world religions is often required or at least offered. In my education of Islam, there was no classroom needed. Reka was Muslim. When I first introduced myself to her, rather, when she introduced herself to me, I noticed that she was wearing jeans, a long sleeved t-shirt and a headscarf when it was at least 90 degrees Fahrenheit outside. I figured she had to be of a different religion but was not entirely sure which one. Yet, she was friendly and conversation came easily.

It was difficult at first to adjust to her lifestyle, but the lessons were worth learning. To begin with, she was required to wear her headscarf any time there were males present and was never allowed to show any part of her legs or arms. This was difficult in that we lived in a co-ed dorm. We always had to make sure her door was shut when we were spending time in her room and occasionally had to act as lookouts in the hall way to make sure it was “safe” for her to sprint from one room to another. It seemed to confuse the other American boys as to why Reka would get upset when seen without her headscarf. In the culture of the Catholic religion, seeing a girl’s hair is commonplace, where as for Muslims, the only one to see a woman’s hair is her husband. Realizing that this was important to her, we made the necessary adjustments to prevent accidents. While some see the dress rules as a form of oppression, Reka valued them as a form of modesty.

Our next lesson came in the form of prayer. The four of us spent a good deal of time examining our religious histories and beliefs with one another. I was surprised to find the great deal of similarity that exists between Islam and Christianity. For example, we have the same historical figures, such as Abraham, Moses, Mary and Jesus. It was very interesting to listen to a different viewpoint on the characters on which my faith is based. Discovering these similarities gave our group the base we needed to share religious experiences with each other. It became

customary for the four of us to pray together before eating. We would take turns improvising prayers to our common God, expressing thanksgiving for the friendships and food before us and also supplication for assistance in any trials we had to face.

We also learned to appreciate the differences our religions had to offer. Reka allowed us to sit in while she prayed and explained the symbolism behind the specific dress, actions and prayer objects that she used. While time-outs for prayer five times a day took some getting used to, we learned to appreciate the beauty of diversity when it comes to religion. Reka taught that even though religious differences exist, they are not something to be feared. Rather, they should be explored and valued.

Lesson 2: A lesson in International relations

April 25th was one of the most educational days during my time in Australia. On that Wednesday, the entire country celebrated ANZAC Day. ANZAC stands for Australian and New Zealand Army Corps and celebrates the soldiers that fought in the wars from World War I up to Vietnam. While I found it exhilarating to be waving the flag of another country and cheering on their soldiers, the lesson in international relations took place in a conversation that I had with Reka and Arisa later that day.

In a discussion on national holidays, we came to the realization that when we learn about history, we learn about our country being the “good guy”. But there is always another side to the story. In Japan, there is a day on which they remember those harmed by the bombings of Nagasaki and Hiroshima, committed by the American armed forces. In Indonesia, they celebrate their day of independence – from Japan. During our grandparents’ time, our countries were far

from maintaining peaceful relations with one another. Just a few generations later we had maintained even more than peace; we were friends.

My relationship with these girls gives me a sense of hope. Old wounds between enemies can heal overtime. Through communication and having an open mind, one can embrace others of different nationalities. Peace and understanding is possible between nations, even if those involved do not always see exactly eye to eye on everything.

Lesson 3: The importance of critical thinking

While it was evident that Reka had a strong devotion to her faith, she was not one for blindly following the rules. She insisted on trying things out for herself before deciding whether they went against her beliefs or not. For example, Islam states that she is not allowed to go out dancing. In the Australian culture, it was the most popular thing to do at night, especially on weekends. Reka admitted many times that she was curious as to what the night life was like and was determined to try it out for herself. She proved to be a very good dancer.

Her spirit of rebellion and adventure was also present in the very fact that she was a Muslim woman from Java, Indonesia attending college in another country. While her parents were hoping she would live in Java and marry a man from Java, Reka had other plans for her life. Her future goals included getting a job in the Indonesian government, spending sometime working or studying in America and, somewhere along the way, meeting a man who shares her religious beliefs and her intellectual capacity.

This spirit of adventure has allowed her to go beyond the barriers that her culture has set up for her and enriched her life. Her values are in no way weakened by her sense of rebellion, but

rather they are strengthened. She knows, without a doubt, that she is living the life she was made to live. I believe this is one of the most admirable traits of her personality. It is one that I'm working to foster in my own life.

Lesson 4: Courage and Caring

Reka is only a year older than myself, yet she has done so much to contribute to wider world already. After graduating from high school, a group of friends, including Reka collaborated to start a school for underprivileged children. They are the founders and now, the teachers of that school. She participated in rallies and marches against a government that she believed to be unjust. The government they protested against was eventually overthrown. Her desire now, is to work for the current Indonesian government, in order to promote peace in the country she loves so much. As a Saint Mary's student, I've been learning that young women are powerful and can make a difference in the wider world. Reka is an example of this. She is a model of intelligence, compassion and strength that I hope to follow.

I have heard that Reka has recently graduated from her university in Jakarta and has been offered two jobs, one in broadcasting with the major television station in Jakarta and the other with the Indonesian government. She has accepted the job in foreign relations. She has also been spending a great deal of time helping victims of a recent earthquake that occurred in Indonesia. With young women such as Reka taking on positions of power, our world may very well be on a path towards global peace and a sense of compassion towards all humanity.

I hope to take these lessons from Reka and make them a part of my life and a part of my person. In becoming friends with girls from backgrounds so different from my own, I have a

slightly wider perception on the world. I have reevaluated my own beliefs in order to make them stronger and also made some changes where they were needed. While we were joking around, singing and clapping, we had no idea of the difference that we would make in the lives of one another.