

Ten Minute T(ea) with Ms. Suzanne DeBuhr

*Interview conducted by Sophia Wilson Pelton
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Q) What originally drew you to learn about religions?

A) I started college at the University of Illinois, but I transferred to a small Lutheran liberal arts college called St. Olaf College. I was raised in the Lutheran church, I went to Sunday school, I was confirmed, all of that, but my junior year at St. Olaf was my first encounter with religion as an academic discipline. I ended up applying to a program abroad that satisfied two of my religions requirements. When I came back from that trip I basically felt like I had been lied to my whole life and like I had to keep studying this thing that was so much bigger and deeper and broader than what I had learned in the church. I just think there are so many layers to religion. A branch of religion is theology, but it's also history. It's politics. It's social justice. It's psychology. It's philosophy. It's all of those things. And I had a personal connection because I really did feel like I had to figure out what was true.

Q) So how did you end up reconciling those two things? In terms of maybe where you are now.

A) I'm not sure I've ever reconciled the two, personally and academically. I think a lot of students now feel they have some kind of spirituality that they're aware of as part of their humanity. I definitely feel that, but I've stopped going to church. I don't find the organized part of religion very satisfying or fulfilling. So, it's sort of funny that I run Chapel, but the Chapel program here is really different for Church. It's a space for education and reflection. It's not really a space for worship. So, I don't know what I would say about reconciling them...

Q) Do you find it difficult teaching a religions class with your own bias? Political, or religious, or whatever...

A) I think I found it more difficult when I started teaching because you're still figuring out what kind of teacher you want to be and how you want to present yourself. The hardest thing now is actually teaching kids who are really religious, because the academic study is really different. It's not that I want students to set aside beliefs. I want them to use their beliefs as inspiration, but I also want them to be critical of their beliefs — to see the difference between a practice or a cultural experience and an object of study. I think I've gotten better at negotiating that with my students but it's still a point of struggle for my students who are quite religious to separate themselves from that understanding and really embrace [an] academic viewpoint.

Q) Were you surprised at all of the spiritual culture of Milton, or rather lack thereof?

A) No, I knew Milton's culture pretty well. When I first started here, I was told that praying and God language and all that was just not part of the culture and that was actually really perfect for

me. I think part of my understanding of spirituality and my orientation toward the world is very pluralistic — that there's wisdom in everything we see and read and experience, whether it's particularly religious or not. I think people can have spiritual experiences being outside, reading a book, you know, all those things. So, it was actually a perfect fit for me, because I don't need for students to have an experience with some particular divine sense of the world. I do feel like students need to entertain the idea of spirituality, whether they take it on or not. I have no expectations, but I think the idea of spirituality is really important to encounter as a teenager.

Q) Do you wish there were more spaces at Milton for more spirituality, in terms of mindfulness?

Q) Yeah I do. I wish there was a way for us to think of spirituality as part of the life of the human, which, I think in school means having spaces for those kinds of things. It would be great, in my mind, to have a room that just looks like an empty meditation hall, where people can come in, and maybe we could do different programming and stuff. But yeah I would love for that to be more a part of the culture. It's just hard to imagine how to make that works, especially if you don't have the space.

Ms. Debuhr oversees the chapel service in conjunction with teaching two courses: Religions of the Middle East and Religions. In addition, Ms. DeBuhr also helps facilitate in our effective education classes. Her glowing passion for teaching, and commitment to mindfulness makes her an adult on campus who everyone feels comfortable and inspired when talking to. It is no surprise that Ms. DeBuhr has been at Milton for so long, as her passion for teaching radiates through her courses.