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“Find your passion, pursue it with all you have; and then you’ll be happy.” Like a sound byte from a song that stays in your head, I could not shake my mentor’s words of wisdom. They served as a compass for me, though I did not arrive at my true North immediately.

I did not find what I sought until my freshman year of college when I read “Uno e sette,” a short story by the Italian artist Gianni Rodari. Rodari’s story painted a picture of seven boys, all living parallel lives, separated only by geography. The boys become men and eventually find themselves at war with each other, never knowing that they once were so identical they could have been the same person. My favorite line reminded me that, no matter our backgrounds, “We all laugh in the same language.” I began to see that all people have some common ground, but more often than not it remains undiscovered. I decided that connecting people through understanding could be the answer to the great divide between the East and West, the divide that political scientist Samuel Huntington described as a Clash of Civilizations.

Reading that story at a time when my country was deciding whether or not to invade Iraq solidified something in me that I knew existed, but did not yet recognize as the driving force in my life. Since the University of Alabama offers no courses in Middle Eastern politics or Islam, I have primarily relied on independent study courses to pursue my interests. However, I have found it difficult to fully absorb all that I have studied without knowledgeable faculty to challenge my interpretations and answer my questions. I soon realized that in order to understand the region’s culture, I need to understand its people; and the only way to do that is to live amongst them.