

Navigare necesse est, vivere non est necesse

The travel to United States sounds in any case, exciting, adventurous, and for many people utopian. But, to travel to America, organized by Bureau for Educational and Cultural Affairs of US State Department, sounds as being privileged.

This is exactly how I felt when I was informed that I was chosen to be part of a group of twenty four people, of different professions and nationalities from Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbia and Croatia, ready to act within their communities in order to promote inter-religious dialogue and tolerance.

Thanks to the three weeks program of exchange in Washington DC and Philadelphia, within the program Faith and Community: A Dialogue, during the month of October I got a unique chance for cooperation and learning from American experts and institutions involved in inter-religious solidarity and religious pluralism.

Finally, very excited and curious, I awaited the day when the big iron bird will leave the ground and get me into this great adventure.

A friend came to pick me up at early sunrise, at 5 o'clock already, and drove me off to Sarajevo airport. We even had enough time for the first morning coffee, because the flight to Munich, that lasts one hour and a half, was scheduled at 6.40. It all went perfectly, and even the 3, 5-hours wait until the next flight, did not pose any problem, for our small group of six members from Bosnia and Herzegovina. Munich airport is huge, and therefore we took the opportunity to walk in shops and entertain ourselves by trying on the sunglasses of soundly brands and spraying luxurious, expensive perfumes.

The rigorous customs control and flight from Munich to Washington in economy class is certainly not something that you would wish to experience for the whole 9 hours and 10 minutes. But, believe it or not, it can also be very pleasant, if you have a handsome, interesting co-traveler, like the one I had on seat 15B. Horst is German, just a few years older than me, merchant of medical equipment for planes and he travels to the States for business. Since the very beginning we found our communal topics for conversation, and during the breaks we resolved the crossword puzzle. The beginner's level though, but anyway...

We parted when we arrived at Washington Dulles International Airport – and he continued his trip to Florida, while I reached my final destination. We exchanged the e-mail addresses, giving ourselves a chance to remain in contact.

And my travel itinerary, well, started in Washington.

While driving from the airport to hotel, my attention was drawn to long limousines, good and wide roads and traffic jam that did not compel us from enjoying in every moment since our dream was coming true.

Upon arrival in Washington, I remained surprised by the tame beauty of a city put in perfect order. The

hotel in front of which we disembarked is situated in New Hampshire Avenue NW, on perfect location in historical area of Georgetown, just across George Washington University. That is prestigious, private university, only four blocks far from the White House. It is famous for its undergraduate programs in the fields of international relations and business, political science and communication, and for the postgraduate and doctoral studies of business and social sciences, international relations, medicine, education, public health and law.



The quarter where this hotel was situated was peaceful, buildings were relatively low (in comparison to my view of the buildings in the States), and everything was full of gardens with flowers in many colors. This was not the picture that I conceived. Somehow I expected the jungle of concrete and constructions that would be high enough to make me dizzy.

Instead of that, the wide streets were bordered with connected residential blocks, with lively facades, lace, brass fences, next to the stairs leading to the front doors and with neatly shaped parks on circle roundabouts.

And this is not surprising since the ground plan of the city: "Plan of the city destined for permanent seat of United States Government", was drafted by Pierre Charles L'Enfant, and according to proposal by the president George Washington himself!

What really fascinated me were squirrels that were running carelessly, almost like pigeons, among trees, sometimes avoiding skillfully the steps that briskly crossed the sidewalk.

However, this was not the end of surprises. Although at first sight, it was clear that hotel was conceived in a way to conquer the guests with its homely atmosphere, the room where I was accommodated gave much more than I expected. It was completely settled apartment, with fast wireless internet access. The additional contents involved the tea kitchen with mini-refrigerator, microwave stove, coffee machine, hair dryer and iron.



We spent the first day, upon our arrival in Washington, in sight-seeing.

After the short walk next to the World Bank, we arrived to the White House. As it is widely known, that is the main residence and working place of the President of USA. Grandiose construction was erected between 1792. and 1800. The building is originally named "Presidential villa", and the earliest proofs that testify the use of the name "White House" were recorded in 1811. In official context the title "White House – Washington" was established by President Theodore Roosevelt.

The broad Pennsylvania Avenue NW, in front of this marvelous three-floor building, was full of tourists that were looking with interest at the other side of the fence, and indefatigably clicking with their cameras.

But, almost equally attractive to attention was one gentleman, who settled right across the White House, demonstrating his disagreement with the foreign policy of the actual president.

Dressed in shirt with design of American flag, in front of his small tent, he was addressing directly George Bush, showing him as a real terrorist, and asking him to stop sending soldiers to battlefields around the world.



After noting this interesting detail, we continued the sightseeing of Washington boarded on the tourist bus – “trolley sightseeing”, and the ride was to be paid between 28 and 35 \$.

II

You can have the best insight in the well-known places of any city, while riding on a tourist bus. For the price of about 30 dollars, or the price of daily ticket for adults, you can get off at any station and board on the “trolley” again, after you complete the sightseeing of the place that is of interest to you.

Together with 11 friends, who accompanied me in this official visit to America, I followed the aforementioned advice and while, the likeable old man – driver and tourist guide at the same time, gave the basic information on areas we were driving through, I used this ride for filming Washington by my own tiny camera.

We left the bus near the so-Mall), with the intention to use the afternoon for visiting several until 5.30 p.m., free-of-charge from all over the world.

The National Mall is an open space of very center of Washington, marked as site of monumental nucleus that was year 1792. in drawings by Pierre According to L’Enfant plan, Mall was area of “400 feet of width, around one be bordered with gardens and end on on each side.” During the American primarily used for military purposes, cattle slaughtering and production of



called, Mall (National sunny, October museums, that offer, entrance for visitors

the National Park in the the middle axis of one foreseen as early as the Charles L’Enfant.

supposed to cover the kilometer of length, to the slope, with houses Civil War, it was for troops parading, weapons.

Today Mall is a wonderful area, officially established in 1965. Impressive architecture, historical monuments and nine museums of the worldly class, in combination with natural beauties, make it the focus place of sightseeing for many tourists.

The main area is dominated by magnificent core and US Capital Building, the wonderful building situated across the Washington obelisk that serves for meetings of the Senate and House of Representatives.

The National Mall is tourists, but also the different open-air in one such festival,

Our first photographs, was National museum of language, literature, of Western 2004, and it is the dedicated main role in making On all four floors, exhibitions, with displayed. Passing the girl who works us, that she is just screening a and that this is the We decided to enter. And we didn't



not just the place recommended for place for excursions and participation in festivals. We were honored to take part showing Turkish culture and tradition. destination, after we took a few The American Indian Museum.

American Indians was dedicated to life, history and art of the authentic peoples Hemisphere. It was opened in year first national museum in USA, exclusively to Indians. They played the design and setting in museum as well. we had a chance to see abundant more than one million exhibits through the corridor of the third floor, in museum made by-the-way remark to about to close the doors before marvelous film, that lasts 11 minutes, last chance , if we are willing to see it.

repent that we did.

The room was circular, with dome ceiling, and we were sitting on seats that were something between stairs and benches in amphitheater, placed all the way along the wall. The film was shown on the cloth shaped like a cube, elevated from the ground and set in the midst of the room, and below it, there was the imitation of the huge rock.

Showing was spectacular and really difficult to describe in words. This is why I will depict to you only one scene: while on the cloth-screen in front of us we looked at the idyllic winter landscape, showing Indians gathered around the fire, on the rock below, the fire flames were projected, and on the dome above us, the grey clouds that suddenly started to sip snow.

Making photos, unfortunately, was not allowed for us here.



Within the museum there is the shop with wonderful objects, having certificates that they were hand-made by Indians from Navaho reservation that guaranteed their belonging to authentic Indian art.

In case you feel the need, you can please your hunger in a café that offers homeland dishes inspired by culinary tradition of American Indians.

From this museum, we left to The Smithsonian National Air and Space Museum. The building in which this museum is situated is considered to be one of the most important pieces of modern architecture in Washington. The museum was completed in 1976. and it contains the greatest collection of the objects related to air and space, and also to the science of planets, geology and geophysics. It offers free interactive educational courses for organized groups and insight in more than 50000 objects, including air-planes, space-shuttles, motors, balloons, space-craft suits and uniforms.

From here we headed towards Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden. It was named after Sir Joseph H. Hirshhorn, whose huge collection of art works – ranging from French impressionists, to works of the living artists, represent the backbone of this museum.

We did not see the whole display, but we took a few photographs of the works of modern art and sculpture, and hastened to see Freer Gallery of Art, Museum of Asian Art. Opened in 1923, thanks to donation of Sir Charles L. Freer, this gallery contains more than 26000 works of Japanese and Chinese paintings and ceramic pieces, but also the exhibits from the Middle East. At the time of our visit, there was the exhibition of Islamic art.

We had the opportunity to see the Islamic art dating from the period between 9th and 17th century, represented through three main media: architecture, painting art – calligraphy, illustration, book binding, and art in form of object: ceramics, glass, metal, wood and ivory processing.

As you can presume, in these kinds of places, time simply flies, and therefore, at the end of the working time we found ourselves to be in the botanic garden. We briefly rested in wonderful ambiance, and then, in the evening, we returned in metro to our hotel rooms.



III



You can tell whatever you want about the American democracy, but my experience speaks that much more water will flow through the trough before we reach their level. And I will tell you why I think that way.

During the three-week stay in USA, I had an opportunity to visit different institutions and meet people who deal with democracy and human rights, inter-religious dialogue and tolerance. Religious institutions and schools are strictly divided, and

this is why an interesting insight can be made into how schools balance between this division and proclaimed religious freedoms. The knowledge about faiths, namely, does not only reflect the broader education of the individual, but also it remains absolutely necessary for understanding and coexistence in the world full of diversities.



The US Supreme Court protects students` commitment to wear religious clothes or manifest their religion, but this practice is forbidden in case it is discriminatory or if it puts pressure on fellow students of the same age who do not share same opinions.

The righteous role of religion in schools provides educational values, since a huge number of art-works, historical facts and aspects of modern life can not be understood without knowing basic religious ideas and their influence.

What I noticed during the three-week stay in America is that through

education, we can overcome stereotypes and prejudices, and develop understanding, democracy and respect for human rights.

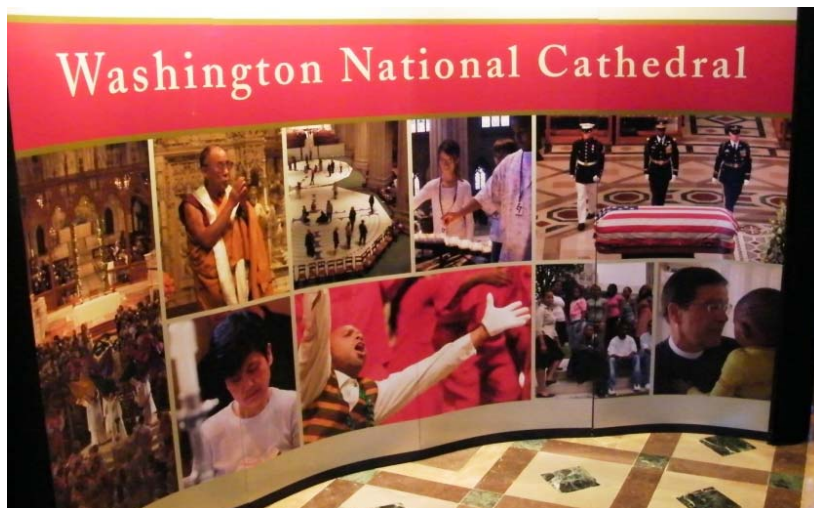
Besides this, teachers have to be very careful, and distinguish between indoctrination and religious education. The pupils should recognize the meaning of religious and philosophical beliefs for many Americans, weather they are related to majority or minority communities and to appreciate these beliefs.

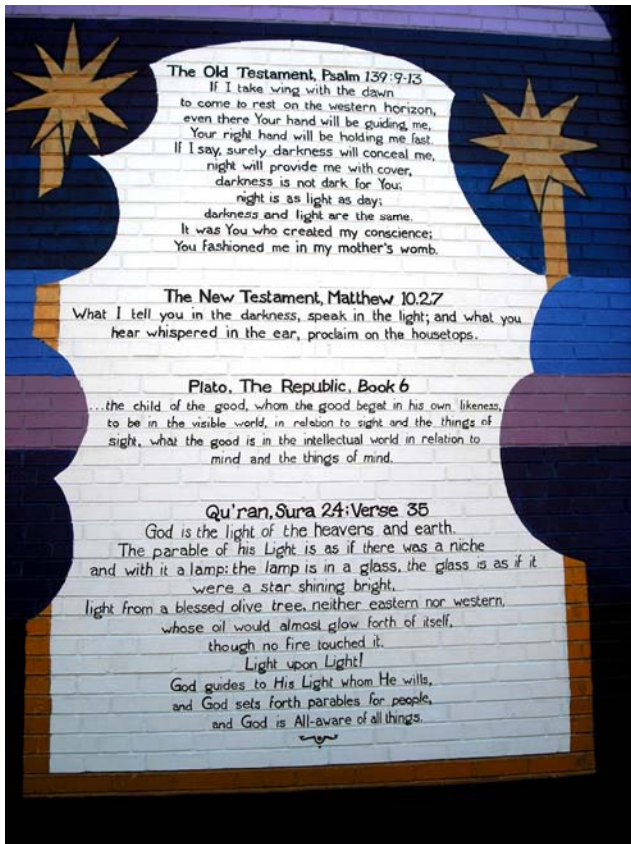
In this sense, all lecturers in public schools have to comply with the guidelines that say:

- Access to religion in schools is academic, not confessional
- In schools, the student`s conscience of religion has to be raised, without making pressure on them to accept or practice any faith.
- The school points out to pupils the diversity of religious views, without imposing any of them.
- In schools the pupils are taught about all religions, and none of the religions should be favored or defamed.

The politics of the state is such that all citizens recognize inseparable connection between preserving their own constitutional rights and their responsibility to defend these rights for other people. What I heard on most meetings that I attended is the strong dedication to civil values that enables people of different perspectives to approach each other politely and with respect.

I was lucky, among other things, to attend the meeting where we were received by Islamic imam and protestant priest, who work together in Inter-religious Conference, whose members, the adherents of eleven religious traditions, actively implement different projects with the main idea of understanding among youth and children and building the common good through inter-religious dialogue.





In National Cathedral of Washington, religious freedoms are openly celebrated, the influence of Quakers in school Friends Select is manifested each day in practice of peaceful resolution of conflict, service, respect and inclusiveness of others, Commission for Human Relations of the City of Philadelphia is the service that can implement the laws related to civil rights and it deals with all aspects of conflicts among groups within the city, many conferences connected with the topics of inter-ideological and international dialogue among Jews, Christians, Muslims, Buddhists, and other groups from United States of America, Asia and Europe, are organized by Institute for Inter-religious and International dialogue at Temple University ...

Counting all references that go in favor of this sentence in this article would take too long, and, before bringing you to temptation, dear readers, to comment (absolutely righteously) how is normal for such institutions to present for *such* guests the above mentioned information, I will share with you, in image and word, what I saw at the streets and in informal

contacts.

On this photo you can see the segment of the mural that covers the whole wall of one building in Philadelphia, and contains the quotations from different religious and philosophical works. However, not only that the artists had problem with quoting or putting in one place, these sage words, but also nobody came or destroyed by graffiti someone's effort to give their contribution to co-existence and understanding among people.

Since my visit happened in times of pre-election activities, I saw the small flags in house gardens that show the commitment of the owners for one of the two presidential candidates: McCain or Obama. The similar inscriptions can be seen on automobiles. And no window is broken and no one's car is demolished because of this - enjoying personal liberty did not endanger the freedom of others.

One evening the colleague from my group, completely astonished, called me to show me something. Namely, two blocks further, there was the gay-pride and for us, people from the Balkans, this was something that we have not met before. Besides the fact that we saw something new, we also saw something different – nobody threw stones at the crowd, and no harsh word was uttered.

This article would become too long if I continue to enumerate all the circumstances that made me realize the generosity of the common people, those that I met at the street, in the elevator, and who respected their own property and took care of their behavior towards each other.

And, whatever you think of American democracy, I hope that we will, one day, reach the one, that I have just described, in Bosnia and Herzegovina.



Jasmina Mehmedovic, Tuzla