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**editor's  
note**

by matt comer  
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**A night  
at the  
mosque**

The 30 days between Aug. 11 and Sept. 9 mark one of the holiest times in the Islamic holy year. Like other faiths the world over, Muslims' holy year marks occasional holidays, fasting and prayer times and moments for reflection and celebration. In Ramadan, Muslims fast during the daylight hours and refrain from food, drink or sex until nightfall. The month-long celebration is time to cleanse oneself emotionally, physically and spiritually. The celebration also encourages followers to forgive those who have wronged them and reevaluate their spiritual journey and commitment.

But this year's Ramadan celebrations in the U.S. are overshadowed nationally by a raging controversy out of New York City. A group of investors, developers and others have planned and been approved for the construction of an Islamic community center two blocks from Ground Zero. Some family members of those who lost their lives on Sept. 11, 2001, are outraged. Conservative political and opinion leaders — along with some progressives — have jumped on the bandwagon and also spoken out forcefully against the community center's construction.

The center, now named Park51, would be several stories high and, like a YMCA, contain recreational spaces — a pool, basketball court and other amenities. Like other community center's operated by religious institutions, Park51 would also contain prayer space. From these simple and seemingly innocuous facts, detractors of the so-called "Ground Zero Mosque" have been able to draw upon the fears of the American people and build political capital through what I can only guess is deliberate misunderstanding.

The opposition to Park51's construction boils down to one basic argument: "The Muslims are the ones who attacked us on 9/11 and building a 'mosque' near Ground Zero is a continuation of their centuries-old practice of building mosques on top of their mightiest conquests, and serves an offensive slap in the face to those who lost their lives."

As can many times be expected in American political discourse, reason and common sense have left the building as politically expedient and convenient talking

points — usually based on zero fact — take center stage.

It seems Westerners, whether they be European or American, are unable to detach their notions of what it is "to be Muslim" — based often on very limited knowledge or exposure — from the horrific terrorist attacks they've seen play out in the U.S. and abroad by those radical few claiming to act in God's and the religion's name. It is an unfortunate reality, and one I hope can be changed as Jews, Christians, Muslims, other people of faith and those of no faith come together for better understanding of each other and our customs, traditions and cultures.

Charlotte's Muslim community took a big step toward reconciliation during this year's Ramadan celebrations, holding open houses at two area mosques: the Islamic Center of Charlotte and the Islamic Society of Greater Charlotte.

Luckily, I was able to attend the first open house at the Islamic Center. As I drove there, I felt an uneasy feeling and didn't know what to expect. I already knew, intellectually and academically, some bits about Islam and its history. I knew that Muslims are monotheistic and claim to worship the God of Abraham — the same deity I worship. Regardless, never having been to a mosque or interacting with great numbers of Muslims, I felt uncomfortable.

All that changed once I entered the building, was welcomed warmly with strong, reassuring handshakes and allowed to be present as members there knelt and participated in evening prayers. As fellow open house attendees, many of them Christian, asked questions and the Center's members answered them, I heard familiar lessons and messages — statements so similar to what I've read in the Bible. I heard names of prophets, like Noah, Moses and Abraham. And, of course, I heard their stories of Jesus and Mary from the Quran.

Suddenly, I felt surprisingly comfortable and at ease. I thought to myself, "What difference really is there between my religion and this one? There doesn't seem to be much difference at all!"

Of course, I've always "known" that. I do read books and I did pay attention during class. But, I never had a chance to *feel* it — to feel connected to and immediately at ease with those who identify as Muslim.

My time at the Islamic Center's open house was an eye-opener. It is an experience I wish all Americans could have, even as political and opinion leaders continue to grapple for attention over the Park51 controversy. I've often thought the best knowledge comes from first-hand experiences. My night at the mosque was certainly one of those. ::

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