

BEING THERE: WHAT DO STUDENTS LEARN BY VISITING HOUSES OF WORSHIP?

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Like my fellow contributors to this issue of *CrossCurrents*, I hope to demonstrate in this essay that interreligious engagement may best be understood as embodied, sensual practice—as a matter of bodies in space, viscerally tied to their senses and surroundings, rather than the abstract exchange of ideas or beliefs.

Let's start, then, with bodies in space. Specifically, ninth graders on a crowded school bus, crawling down the Long Island Expressway, on their way to visit the Ganesh Temple in Flushing, Queens. The traffic is miserable, and we're running late. Some of the students talk quietly with friends, or gaze out the window as Queens bounces by, but most are starting to get a bit jumpy—riled up with giddy field trip energy. Their teachers and I make small talk, while anxiously checking our progress on Google Maps. At last we reach the exit at Kissena Boulevard, then make our way through the busy streets. The students tumble off the bus at the corner of Bowne Street and Holly Avenue, remove their shoes in the temple basement, then head upstairs to encounter . . .

To encounter *what* exactly? Why have we devoted an entire afternoon to bringing a busload of students—predominantly Christian, Jewish, and secular kids from Manhattan and Brooklyn—to visit the largest Hindu

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temple in Queens? It takes a fair amount of time, energy, and money to bring these fidgety teenage bodies to an unfamiliar sacred space, so why go to all the trouble? What will they learn by *being there* in a Hindu temple that they can't learn by studying Hinduism in school?

In my work at the Interfaith Center of New York, I help local teachers plan such place-based religious diversity education programs (aka, field trips) for their students. And I direct the Religious Worlds of New York summer institute, which trains teachers from throughout the country to develop and facilitate such programs themselves.¹ I am deeply committed to place-based, experiential education, which I see as an important alternative to the reductive “dates and doctrines” pedagogy of the conventional world religions curriculum.² As a cultural anthropologist, my own understanding of religious life has been profoundly shaped by my experiences conducting ethnographic research on Black–Jewish relations in the Brooklyn neighborhood of Crown Heights—attending local synagogues and churches, enjoying Sabbath meals and community picnics, volunteering at local non-profits, and simply walking the tree-lined streets of the neighborhood.³ I know, in my bones, that embodied encounters with religious diversity can be transformative educational experiences. But in all honesty, I must admit, I'm not quite sure why. The more I've thought about it, the less confident I am of any simple answer.

I have argued elsewhere that site visits to local houses of worship give students an opportunity to meet, and learn from, their religiously diverse neighbors.⁴ This personal engagement across faith lines is a uniquely valuable learning experience, and helps to strengthen the fabric of our shared civic life, but it doesn't really require a bus trip to Queens. Such conversations can happen just as well in a classroom setting with guest speakers—or for that matter online, with the Web-based dialogues facilitated by a growing number of non-profit organizations.⁵ Being there in our neighbors' sacred spaces presumably teaches us something different than talking with them about their lives.

Contrary to what I have sometimes told students, I don't think a brief visit to an unfamiliar house of worship really offers a meaningful “first-hand experience” of religious life in the community one is visiting. Over a century of research in cultural anthropology and other fields has shown that one's sensory experience is necessarily shaped by one's cultural background, so a non-Hindu student gazing in wonder at the garlanded deities

lining the walls of the Ganesh Temple, for example, is not really gaining a personal understanding of the role of darshan (beholding the divine) in Hindu religious life.⁶ Students may have their own vivid experiences of a house of worship they visit, but they rarely, if ever, come to understand how the place feels to members of its congregation. It may be possible to achieve such empathic understanding through an extended field research project, but not by doing a half-hour walking tour, hearing a presentation from a community leader, then getting back on the bus for home. Being there in our neighbors' sacred spaces does not necessarily help us see the world through their eyes.

And yet here we are fighting traffic on the Long Island Expressway, so a busload of students can have a brief, and perhaps superficial, experience of a Hindu temple. What do they really learn from this embodied encounter? Far more than gaining any content knowledge or understanding, I will ultimately argue that such site visits to unfamiliar houses of worship offer students, and others, an opportunity to fashion a new sense of self or personhood—a chance to become, through the encounter itself, a more deeply engaged member of their religiously diverse society. Being there in our neighbors' sacred spaces thus gives us an opportunity to be changed by their lives.

I will return to this argument below, but first we need to visit a few local houses of worship, and consider more carefully what we can and cannot learn there.⁷ In the following three sections, I will start with experiences that are closely tied to factual knowledge about religious practice, then examine a quirkier moment of encounter, and finally explore how the mood of a space may shape our understanding of a faith. Each section will move a bit further away from classroom learning, toward the kinds of things we can only learn by being there.

From doctrine to practice

As any world religions textbook will tell you, Muslims from Dakar to Detroit face toward the city of Mecca—and specifically the ancient shrine known as the Kaaba—while performing their regular daily prayers. This ritual orientation is known as qibla (literally, direction). It reflects a number of fundamental principles of Islam, serving to both symbolize and instantiate the global unity of the Muslim community, and by extension the unity of a monotheistic God.

But how are worshippers assured of the proper qibla when they attend a mosque for one of their daily prayers? If they don't yet have one of the many qibla-finder apps installed on their phone, how do they know what direction to face? Nearly all mosques mark the qibla with an ornamental niche known as a mihrab, as well as other architectural or design elements that orient the congregation in prayer. However, no two mosques accomplish this essential task in precisely the same way. By shifting our focus from abstract doctrine to everyday practice, and visiting a few different New York mosques, we can trace the internal diversity of Muslim life alongside the global unity of Islam.

The Islamic Cultural Center of New York, often known as the 96th Street Mosque, is New York City's largest and most prominent mosque—built in the 1980s with financial support from Muslim-majority countries nationwide (Fig 1). The mihrab at the Islamic Cultural Center is a towering structure of glass and gold, decorated with geometric patterns that split the difference between sleek modern architecture and traditional Islamic design. It's visually striking but hardly needed for qibla, because the mosque itself was built with its prayer space oriented to Mecca. The building sits at an angle within its lot, with its qibla wall facing northeast, 29° askew to Manhattan's street grid. As Jerrilynn Dodds and Edward Gradza point out in their fantastic book *New York Masjid*, this “overt defiance of the grid” suggests a transcendence of profane social life. “At the Masjid,” one congregant tells Dodds and Gradza, “Third Avenue comes to its knees before God.”⁸

This imposing structure is hardly typical of New York mosques, however. The vast majority of the city's approximately 300 mosques have been carved out of a range of renovated spaces, including former private homes, warehouses, storefronts, and movie theaters.⁹ The Mosque of Islamic Brotherhood, for example, was built in the 1970s in a Harlem tenement that was purchased and renovated by the predominantly African American congregation after being condemned by the city's Department of Buildings. The mihrab at MIB is a modest but lovely structure of dappled greenish tile, and the qibla is marked on the floor of the prayer space with a patterned carpet laid at an angle, slightly askew to the walls. Without the luxury of a purpose-built space, most New York mosques use a range of humble design features—geometric carpets or strips of tape—to orient the prayers of the faithful toward Mecca.



Figure 1. Students from an all-girls Catholic high school visiting the Islamic Cultural Center of New York in January 2016. Students' faces have been blurred to protect their privacy. Photo by the author.

The bustling Islamic Center at New York University also marks the qibla with carpet, but it does so quite differently from other local mosques—in a way that speaks to its social context on the campus of a religiously diverse university. ICNYU's prayer space is an airy, open room, with dramatic floor-to-ceiling windows overlooking Washington Square Park. It is also one of the largest meeting rooms in NYU's Center for Global Spiritual Life, so in addition to regular Muslim prayers it is used for a wide range of student forums and public events. The space is both Muslim and multifaith, so the qibla is indicated by a subtle pattern of fluid shapes in a mottled gray and black carpet, rather than the dramatic stripes or geometric forms more typical of mosque design in New York. The pattern seems irregular at first glance, no different from the nondescript carpets found throughout the university. But once you notice it, the design points clearly toward the northeast corner of the room—and toward the spiritual center of the Muslim world in Mecca.

Visiting these three Manhattan mosques can therefore teach us a great deal about the translation of doctrine into practice, as well as the distinctive social contexts of diverse Muslim communities. Muslims throughout the world orient their daily prayers toward Mecca, yet they do so quite differently at an architectural marvel like the Islamic Cultural Center of New York, a modest congregation like the Mosque of Islamic Brotherhood, and a campus institution like the Islamic Center at New York University.

But do we really need to be there in these spaces, in order to grasp the significance of their carpets? The vast majority of visiting students would never notice or understand the visual details described in this section without direction from teachers or community leaders, and honestly, this kind of scaffolded perception—*Look here kids, and see this*—may be more effective in an illustrated textbook or PowerPoint presentation than in the overwhelming sensory space of an unfamiliar house of worship. Rather than piling their students on buses, teachers could simply read *New York Masjid*, scan a few photographs, and take it from there. It is essential for students to understand the complex relationships between doctrine and practice in all faith communities, but I'm not sure the ties between qibla and carpet offer a compelling justification for place-based education.

Quirky details

There are, however, important aspects of life in every faith community that will never make it onto a textbook page or PowerPoint slide, and can only be experienced first-hand. These quirky details may or may not be tied to the beliefs and values of a faith tradition, but they shape the texture of everyday religious life, and often grab the eyes of students visiting a house of worship. For example, upon approaching the main entrance of the Ganesh Temple in Flushing, one inevitably wonders why “BREAKING COCONUTS HERE IS STRICTLY PROHIBITED,” as a prominent plastic sign makes clear. One may then feel a certain sense of relief when another sign points toward a closet-sized room with a large commercial sink that is identified as the “COCONUT BREAKING AREA.”

The Ganesh Temple (more properly known as the Śrī Mahā Vallabha Ganapati Devasthānam, and/or the Hindu Temple Society of North America) is New York's oldest and largest Hindu temple. The building was

consecrated on July 4, 1977, and has grown to serve the thriving Indian immigrant communities of Queens, the Long Island suburbs, and beyond. The temple's founders, directors, and priests are predominantly South Indian (many with roots in Tamil Nadu), but the temple's email list of over 20,000 devotees reflects the broad diversity of the Indian diaspora.¹⁰

The main prayer hall of the Ganesh Temple is one of the most extraordinary public spaces in New York. At the center of the large, sunlit room an intricately carved black stone shrine holds an imposing figure of the elephant-headed Lord Ganesh, the main deity of the temple. The walls are lined with slightly smaller figures of about two dozen deities—Vishnu, Shiva, Lakshmi, Krishna, Parvati, Hanuman, and many more, reflecting a wide spectrum of Hindu devotional life. The deities are carved out of solid stone or bronze, many overlaid with generous amounts of silver, gold, and semi-precious stones. They are dressed in intricate, densely woven fabrics, usually adorned with brightly colored garlands of fresh flowers, and often surrounded by fragrant offerings of fruit, flowers, spices, milk, or ghee. On a busy morning, the space is crowded with small groups of devotees and priests conducting a range of simultaneous ceremonies, or simply sitting and absorbing the presence of the divine. Upon entering the room, one is immersed in a vibrant, many-layered sensory field—a truly remarkable experience for most first-time visitors.

But against this rich backdrop, many of the students and teachers with whom I have visited the Ganesh Temple have noticed and commented on a more prosaic detail of temple life: the signs. The visual field of the prayer hall is studded with dozens of small plastic signs—standing out in black and white against the colorful pageant of Hindu devotion, their sharp lines of English text imposing a sense of order upon the busy flow of religious life. The deities lining the prayer hall walls stand behind a continuous border of black nylon straps, supported by crowd-control stanchions like those found at a bank. Every eight or ten feet along this barrier, a sign implores both visitors and devotees: “PLEASE, DO NOT CROSS THE LINE OR TOUCH THE DEITY. THANK YOU.” Turn to face the central shrine for Ganesh, and a sign perched upon a ridge of black stone reminds you: “PLEASE DO NOT SIT ON THIS.” Walk around to the door of the shrine and another sign makes clear: “ENTRY FOR PRIESTS ONLY.” A particularly large sign on the wall near the front office tells parents: “PLEASE WATCH YOUR CHILDREN. NO EATING, DRINKING, PLAYING, RUNNING AROUND, DISTURBANCES.” And many, many

more. Such signs are peppered throughout the prayer hall, forming a visual counterpoint to the devotional experience at the heart of temple life.

Students visiting the Ganesh Temple often notice all these signs, but do they learn anything from them? Does this place-based experience teach us anything about Hinduism or temple life? A few of the signs reflect significant Hindu traditions and beliefs, or at least prompt interesting questions about them. The breaking of coconuts, for example, is a deeply symbolic ritual act for many Hindus—often described as a metaphor for cracking the hard shell of the ego to reveal the sweetness of divinity within. Indeed, the historian of religion Alf Hiltebeitel has suggested that despite the diversity of Hindu traditions and beliefs, the humble acts of breaking coconuts and lighting camphor provide “a rather profound folk definition of Hinduism.”¹¹ With their curiosity piqued by the sign pointing to a “COCONUT BREAKING AREA,” visiting students nearly always ask about this. The answer has no real relationship to a small plastic sign, but the question wouldn’t have been posed without it. Other signs hint at important aspects of Hindu religiosity, without referencing specific traditions or beliefs. It would be a stretch, for example, to read “PLEASE, DO NOT CROSS THE LINE OR TOUCH THE DEITY” as an explicit theological statement—the sign has more to do with crowd control than theology—but it certainly does tell us something about the relationship between devotee and divinity at the Ganesh Temple, and the privileged status of the temple’s priests as mediators of this relationship.

Many other signs, however, have no connection at all to Hindu traditions or beliefs. The injunction against “EATING, DRINKING, PLAYING, RUNNING AROUND, DISTURBANCES” is really all about crowd control and doesn’t tell us anything about the religious beliefs of temple devotees. That does *not* mean, however, that it tells us nothing at all. Indeed, the importance of crowd control in the Ganesh Temple’s prayer hall says a great deal about American Hinduism, and the social pressures facing immigrant religious communities.

Unlike most synagogues, churches, and mosques, the religious life of most Hindu temples is not structured around regularly scheduled congregational prayer services.¹² With the exception of major annual festivals, individuals and families come to the temple whenever it is convenient or auspicious for them, and make offerings to various deities with or

without the assistance of the temple's priests. Hundreds of devotees may perform dozens of separate rituals over the course of a quiet weekday, and many thousands may do so over the course of a busy weekend. They don't sit in pews, or line up facing Mecca. The priests don't tell them when to "Please rise" and "Be seated." The temple staff doesn't usually supervise, and things can get a bit chaotic.

At the same time, however, the temple is committed to maintaining what one might describe as a "Western"—or rather, middle-class American—sense of cleanliness, order, and decorum. This commitment undoubtedly reflects the pressure of assimilation to American Protestant norms, but it's nevertheless deeply felt by many devotees. For example, in a presentation to a group of students, one member of the temple's board of directors used the familiar phrase "cleanliness is next to godliness" (evidently popularized by the Methodist founder John Wesley in a 1778 sermon) to explain why he felt a stronger connection to the divine at the relatively orderly Ganesh Temple than at what he described, accurately or not, as the overcrowded, dirty temples of his South Indian hometown. It is a constant challenge to maintain order in the temple's prayer hall, while preserving the flexibility and individuality of traditional Hindu prayer. Hence all the little plastic signs. Their consistent message of "No . . . DISTURBANCES" is an effort to negotiate the tension between Indian traditions and American expectations. The signs thus speak to fundamental questions about immigration, assimilation, and Hindu life in Queens.¹³

But as with the ties between qibla and carpet discussed above, the vast majority of visiting students will never connect these far-reaching issues to the little signs they notice in the Ganesh Temple prayer hall. Sometimes the topic of individual versus congregational prayer comes up in student conversations with community leaders. And as I have noted, community leaders often remark on the importance of cleanliness in temple life. But I've never heard students, teachers, or community leaders link these issues to the temple's signage. The signs thus remain a mystery, or worse. I once saw a student direct his friend's attention to one of the signs, then heard him remark in a dismissive tone, "Man, what a bossy temple."

This misunderstanding highlights a risk that may be inherent to place-based education. When we bring students to visit an unfamiliar

house of worship, we invite them to engage with religious diversity through an open-ended, ethnographic pedagogy that requires them to make sense of their own experiences. Teachers and community leaders may help students understand what they see, hear, and feel, but embodied experience necessarily exceeds these well-meaning interpretive frames. Ideally, this student-centered pedagogy allows for a rich understanding of religious diversity, far beyond the superficial “religious literacy” offered by most world religions textbooks. But unfortunately, it also opens the door for mistaken assumptions and ethnocentric stereotypes. It can be hard to make sense of quirky details that disrupt our expectations about religious diversity, but these details are an important element of any authentic place-based understanding.

The mood of a space

At times, however, our understanding of an unfamiliar house of worship rests on a visceral sense of the space as a whole, rather than any specific details or sensory cues. We walk in and the mood of the place just hits us—its effervescent energy, meditative silence, sheer beauty, or what-have-you. Such affective responses often form our most enduring impression of a house of worship. Long after the details fade, we remember how the place made us *feel*. But it’s not clear what, if anything, these feelings teach us about a faith community or tradition. Do we learn anything from our perceptions of beauty? Or silence? Or energy? I will explore these questions by describing what I came to understand, and misunderstand, from the silence of a Buddhist temple on the Upper West Side.

The Chogyesa Zen Temple of New York inhabits a formerly residential limestone townhouse on West 96th Street, just steps from Central Park. The temple was founded in the 1970s by the Korean Jogye Order of Seon (or Zen) Buddhism, and was originally based in Woodside, Queens, before moving to its Upper West Side location in 2003. It’s a relatively quiet, upscale residential neighborhood, but 96th Street itself is one the busiest crosstown thoroughfares in Manhattan, with four lanes of traffic jostling in and out of a transverse that cuts across the park. Yellow cabs line up by the dozen at red lights on Central Park West, and the sidewalk is often crowded with pedestrians heading to the park, the subway station on the corner, or the imposing apartment buildings on Columbus Avenue. It’s easy for passersby to miss the Chogyesa Temple, which is

indistinguishable from neighboring buildings but for a pair of small wooden signs, in English and Korean, by the top of the stoop.

Passing through the front door and a small vestibule, one enters a dark, nondescript hallway—a somewhat cramped and disorienting space, especially when crowded with a couple dozen visitors fumbling to remove their shoes and place them on low shelves by the wall. A narrow stairway rises to the left, leading to the library, dharma room, and small apartments for the abbot and others above. A doorway opens to the right, leading to the temple’s main meditation hall. Through that door, then down a short step, one enters an airy, quiet space—a world apart from the Manhattan streetscape, or so it seems. The walls of the meditation hall are painted a soft, creamy yellow, and decorated with Korean Buddhist art and calligraphy. The space is framed by dark wood architectural details, including an ornamental archway resting on marble pillars. A modest altar holds a small statue of the Buddha, surrounded by candles, incense, fruit, and flowers. Indirect light bathes the room through a gated glass door in the corner, which leads to a small backyard (Fig 2).



Figure 2. K-12 teachers from throughout the United States visiting the Chogyesa Zen Temple of New York in July 2012. Photo courtesy of the Interfaith Center of New York.

The first time I visited the Chogyesa Temple, in 2010, I honestly felt as though I had been transported—as if I had slipped through a crack in the sidewalk, and emerged in a radically different space. The city seemed to fade away as the dark hallway opened into the soft light of the meditation hall. The sharp mid-afternoon glare was replaced by a crystalline glow. A small standing fan whirred gently, fighting the summer heat. I could just make out car horns, echoing from what seemed a great distance, though they were right outside. My breath slowed and deepened as I gazed around the room. Every object I saw—a small bowl of oranges, a clock on the wall—seemed to rest in its place, in a kind of repose. The stillness was palpable, like a quality of the air. And perhaps, I thought, a quality of Buddhist life itself.

Indeed, the concept of “stillness,” or samadhi (in Sanskrit), lies at the heart of Buddhist philosophy, psychology, and meditation practice. The Noble Eightfold Path calls upon Buddhist practitioners (or at least monks, nuns, and other renunciants) to cultivate Sama Samadhi, which is generally translated as “Right Concentration,” but could just as well be rendered in English as “Perfect Stillness.”¹⁴ Most Buddhist texts and teachers describe Sama Samadhi as an advanced meditative state—the attainment of a lifetime, or many lifetimes, of rigorous practice—but it nevertheless establishes an aspirational ideal that shapes nearly all forms of Buddhist meditation and social ethics. One of the central goals of Buddhist practice is thus to help people develop stillness of mind—an experience of subjectivity and the sensory world that may be comparable, in some ways, to the experience of a quiet meditation hall. The stillness of samadhi is ideally independent of a practitioner’s physical surroundings, but Buddhist communities throughout the world have invested a great deal of material and symbolic resources in the design of spaces—temples, monasteries, retreat centers, gardens—that lend themselves to an experience of stillness. As the Canadian Buddhist landscape architect Dennis Winters puts it, “The proper environment for meditation requires a place for relaxation, quietness, peace, and harmony. If the outer world is free from scattering, distracting activity one can focus more clearly in a calm-abiding way.”¹⁵

Needless to say, one is unlikely to achieve Perfect Stillness, or any of the meditative states thought to precede it, during a brief visit to a Buddhist temple. Just as I argued above that a non-Hindu student’s awestruck

gaze at a Hindu deity cannot be equated with a devotee's experience of darshan, my own sense of stillness upon entering the Chogyesa Temple cannot be equated with a Buddhist practitioner's experience of samadhi. And yet, the physical space of the temple's meditation hall has been carefully designed to help one "focus . . . in a calm-abiding way." Simply by being there, and being attentive to the space, one might thus develop a richer understanding of this important element of Buddhist life.

My reverie in the quiet of the meditation hall was soon interrupted, however, by the warm, light-hearted voice of the temple's abbess, Myoji Sunim.¹⁶ I was visiting with a group of teachers, and she invited us to sit for tea and conversation. As she narrated her path to Buddhist practice and community leadership, Myoji Sunim described spending long periods in silent meditation at a secluded monastery in the mountains of Korea, then being shocked and honestly a bit dismayed when the Jogye Order asked her to come to New York in 1995. Listening to her story, it suddenly seemed that in addition to helping us understand Buddhism, the stillness of the meditation hall might help us understand its abbess' own life journey, and the striking contrasts experienced by many Korean immigrants to the United States. Of course, Korea is itself a place of striking contrasts—downtown Seoul would never be mistaken for a mountain-top monastery—so I knew the Chogyesa Temple's meditation hall could not stand in for "Korea" in sweeping, essentialist terms. But still, I imagined that Myoji Sunim, and at least some members of her congregation, must experience the stillness of their temple as an element of traditional Korean life transported to the Upper West Side of Manhattan.

With this immigrant experience in mind, I asked Myoji Sunim about the difference between Buddhist practice here and there. Is it harder, I wondered, to practice meditation in a loud, fast-paced city like New York than in the quiet of the Korean mountains? I don't remember her answer word-for-word, but I will always remember the laughter that preceded it. Evidently, I had cracked her up. Choking back a chuckle, she replied something like: "You kidding? The birds and bugs make you *crazy* in the mountains! Cheep-cheep-cheep, all day and all night long. Not so different from traffic in the city—much worse sometimes. But still you *practice*. No matter where, you just sit and practice." So much for my simplistic, and arguably Orientalist, assumptions about the stillness of traditional Korean life.

Here again, I think we can see both the power and limits of experiential, place-based education. I learned something important about Buddhism by experiencing the contrast between car horns blaring on 96th Street and the silence of the Chogyesa Temple. The visceral sense of stillness in the meditation hall helped me gain an understanding of Buddhist thought and practice that could never be found in a classroom or textbook. But at the same time, my misinterpretation of this stillness gave me a false impression of Buddhist life, and of the Korean immigrant experience in New York. Fortunately, Myoji Sunim quickly debunked the divide between rural and urban, tradition and modernity, East and West, that I had applied to my experience of stillness. But our exchange still highlights the dangers of learning about religion—or anything else for that matter—from one’s affective response to the mood of a space.

Content knowledge and identity formation

For better or worse, it seems that experiential, place-based education is not the most reliable way to learn content knowledge about religious diversity. The unique opportunities for insight and understanding that come with visiting an unfamiliar house of worship are mirrored by very real risks of confusion and misperception. To make matters worse, such misperceptions may open the door for ethnocentric stereotypes, as in a student’s experience of a “bossy” Hindu temple and my own mistaken assumptions about traditional Buddhist life. Teachers and community leaders may work to correct these misunderstandings, but there’s only so much they can do. Indeed, if teachers work too hard to frame or direct student experiences of a space they may sacrifice the inquiry-based pedagogy at the heart of experiential education, turning their diverse neighbors’ sacred spaces into life-sized PowerPoint presentations. Even if one is teaching about everyday religious life, it may be easier for students to gain content knowledge in the controlled environment of the classroom.

But content knowledge is hardly the only goal of education. K-12 schools and other educational institutions have always worked, whether consciously or not, to shape students into certain types of people—creating effective citizens, critical thinkers, or productive members of society, however “effective,” “critical,” and “productive” might be defined. Along with teaching content knowledge and cognitive skills, our schools are powerful engines of identity formation.¹⁷ It is in this context that we

may best understand the role of place-based religious diversity education. As I argued above, site visits to unfamiliar sacred spaces offer students a remarkable opportunity to become new and different people—to fashion a sense of self that is shaped by religious diversity, through the process of encounter itself more than any specific knowledge or new understanding. In short, by visiting diverse houses of worship, students may reimagine themselves as the type of people who visit diverse houses of worship. “Oh yeah,” they can tell their friends and family, “I went to a Hindu temple in Flushing once. It was pretty cool.” It sounds trivial when put so bluntly, but this sense of openness to religious diversity is arguably more significant and enduring than any factual knowledge about religion.

Every pedagogy is, at the same time, a process of identity formation. But place-based education is a uniquely powerful tool for helping students craft a new sense of self, because personal transformation is often catalyzed by—or at least crystallized in—striking, full-bodied experiences. We become new people by placing ourselves (literally) in unfamiliar social worlds, and letting them mark us through the media of our senses. Something has to grab us, take hold, and shake the dust off our assumptions. And then, to confirm our transformation, we need to share our experience with others—we have to tell the tale to make it stick.¹⁸ Rather than simply noting “It was pretty cool,” students might return from the Ganesh Temple and tell their families, “The statues of the gods were so beautiful—covered with silver and gold, and surrounded by flowers. Plus, there were these funny little signs all over the place.” They might return from the Islamic Cultural Center and tell friends, “It’s kind of weird, but the whole place is built on an angle, so it faces toward Mecca instead of Third Avenue.” They might return from the Chogyesa Temple, as I did, shaking their head and wondering, “I don’t know what it was about that place, but I’ve never experienced such calm in the city.”

Moments and memories like these may not reflect a very deep understanding of one’s diverse neighbors’ faith traditions, but they are nevertheless building blocks of connection. They offer a visceral experience of religious difference, and can thus help young people (of all ages) create selves that are truly open to others. And they rarely happen in the classroom—to be changed by an encounter with religious diversity you just have to be there.

Notes

1. The Religious Worlds of New York summer institute is a project of the Interfaith Center of New York and Union Theological Seminary, supported by grants from the National Endowment for the Humanities. For more information, see <http://religiousworldsnyc.org> (accessed on July 29, 2018).
2. For my critique of K-12 world religions pedagogy see Goldschmidt, Henry, 2014, "From World Religions to Lived Religion: Towards a Pedagogy of Civic Engagement in Secondary School Religious Studies Curricula," in Vincent Biondo and Andrew Fiala, eds., *Civility, Religious Pluralism, and Education*, New York: Routledge, pp. 177–192. For broader discussions of the pedagogic, civic, and constitutional issues surrounding K-12 religious diversity education in the United States, see for example: Nord, Warren, and Charles Haynes, 1998, *Taking Religion Seriously Across the Curriculum*, Alexandria, VA: ASCD and the First Amendment Center; Lester, Emile, 2011, *Teaching about Religions: A Democratic Approach for Public Schools*, Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press. For broader critiques of the world religions model of conceptualizing religious diversity, see for example: Cotter, Christopher, and David Robertson, eds., 2016, *After World Religions: Reconstructing Religious Studies*, Abington, UK: Routledge; Masuzawa, Tomoko, 2005, *The Invention of World Religions: Or, How European Universalism was Preserved in the Language of Pluralism*, Chicago: The University of Chicago Press. And for discussions of K-12 place-based education, see for example: Smith, Gregory, and David Sobel, 2010, *Place- and Community-Based Education in Schools*, New York: Routledge; Umphrey, Michael, 2007, *The Power of Community-Centered Education: Teaching as a Craft of Place*, Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield.
3. I conducted field research in Crown Heights from 1996 to 1998. For my analysis of Black–Jewish difference in the neighborhood, see Goldschmidt, Henry, 2006, *Race and Religion among the Chosen Peoples of Crown Heights*, New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press.
4. See Goldschmidt, "From World Religions to Lived Religion," cited above, esp. pp. 185–187.
5. See, for example, the online platforms for intercultural dialogue developed by organizations like Generation Global (formerly Face to Faith), Global Nomads Group, iEARN (the International Education and Resource Network), and Soliya.
6. For a detailed discussion of darshan, and the importance of visual experience in Hindu religious life, see Eck, Diana, 1998, *Darsan: Seeing the Divine Image in Hinduism*, 3rd ed., New York: Columbia University Press.
7. For the sake of simplicity and concision, I will use the familiar term "house of worship" to refer to all of the religious institutions described in this essay. It is important to note, however, that this generic term doesn't quite do justice to the complex roles of these institutions within their communities. Like most other "houses of worship," the institutions I will describe are sites of prayer (both individual and congregational), as well as meditation and other ritual practices, educational programs for community members and others, civic engagement and social justice organizing, and much more. The shifting balance among these various functions is often struck quite differently in different faith communities. To collapse these diverse institutions into the generic term "house of worship" risks imposing a largely Protestant understanding of the role of religion in social life, but that's a topic for another essay.
8. Dodds, Jerrilynn, and Edward Gradza, 2002, *New York Masjid: The Mosques of New York*, Brooklyn: powerHouse Books. Quotes on pgs. 39 and 42.

9. The figure of approximately 300 mosques in New York is an educated guess, drawing in part on Carnes, Tony, 2015, "Mosque City New York," *Journey through NYC Religions*, online at <http://www.nycreligion.info/nyc-mosques/#> (accessed on July 29, 2018). This figure does not include a large number of informal Muslim prayer spaces. For more about these spaces, see Smith, Elta, and Courtney Bender, 2004, "The Creation of Urban Niche Religion: South Asian Taxi Drivers in New York City," in Tony Carnes and Fenggang Yang, eds., *Asian American Religions: The Making and Remaking of Borders and Boundaries*, New York: New York University Press, pp. 76–97.
10. For more on the history and religious life of the Ganesh Temple, see Hawley, John Stratton, 2004, "Global Hinduism in Gotham," in Tony Carnes and Fenggang Yang, eds., *Asian American Religions: The Making and Remaking of Borders and Boundaries*, New York: New York University Press, pp. 114–119.
11. Hildebeitel, Alf, 1991, "Of Camphor and Coconuts," *Wilson Quarterly* 15(3), Summer, pg. 28.
12. Some American Hindu temples do, in fact, hold regularly scheduled prayer services, often on Sunday mornings. This pattern of congregational prayer is common in Indo-Caribbean Hindu communities, but not limited to them. For details and analysis see Hawley, "Global Hinduism in Gotham," cited above, pp. 121–125; and Kurien, Prema, 2007, *A Place at the Multicultural Table: The Development of an American Hinduism*, New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press.
13. This tension between immigrant religious traditions and American expectations of "order" and "decorum" in prayer is by no means unique to Indian or Hindu immigrant communities. For analyses of similar tensions in New York synagogues around the turn of the twentieth century, see, for example: Gurock, Jeffrey, 1990, "A Stage in the Emergence of the Americanized Synagogue among East European Jews: 1890–1910," *Journal of American Ethnic History* 9(2), Spring, pp. 7–25; Prell, Riv-Ellen, 2009, "A Culture of Order: Decorum and the Eldridge Street Synagogue," in Annie Polland, ed., *Academic Angles*, New York: The Museum at Eldridge Street, pp. 14–18, online at <https://www.eldridgestreet.org/wp-content/uploads/academic-angles-booklet.pdf> (accessed on July 31, 2018). Needless to say, my discussion of these issues is *not* meant to imply a normative judgment or critique of Indian Hindu, American Hindu, or American Protestant worship styles.
14. For an introduction to the Eightfold Path and a discussion of meditative practices aimed at cultivating samadhi, see Gethin, Rupert, 1998, *Foundations of Buddhism*, New York: Oxford University Press, pp. 79–84, 174–187. For the range of meanings of the term samadhi see Austin, James, 1998, "The Semantics of Samadhi," *Tricycle: The Buddhist Review* 7(4), Summer, unpaginated online at <https://tricycle.org/magazine/semantics-samadhi> (accessed on July 29, 2018).
15. Winters, Dennis, 1987, "Buddhist Meditation Gardens," *The Tibet Journal* 12(2), Summer, pg. 42.
16. Sunim is a Korean title for Buddhist monks and nuns, equivalent to "Venerable" in English. Myoji Sunim passed away suddenly, at age 65, in November 2011. She is still deeply missed by her community and many other New Yorkers. Her younger brother Doam Sunim is the current abbot of the Chogyesa Temple (as of this writing, in July 2018).
17. For essays exploring the relationship between education and identity formation in a wide range of social contexts and educational institutions, see Levinson, Bradley, Dorothy

Holland, and Douglas Foley, eds., 1996, *The Cultural Production of the Educated Person*, Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.

18. My argument here is inspired by the anthropologist Susan Harding's influential analysis of born-again Christian conversion, in which she argues that "speaking is believing." See Harding, Susan, 1987, "Convicted by the Holy Spirit: The Rhetoric of Fundamental Baptist Conversion," *American Ethnologist* 14(1), February, pp. 167–181.