

Language lessons: Learning with Muslims

by [Amy Frykholm](#) in the [August 26, 2008](#) issue

During the 1990-1991 Gulf War, George Dardess, an English teacher in Rochester, New York, watched on television as the U.S. dropped “smart bombs” on Baghdad. He felt anger and self-reproach. He turned to his wife and said, “I am complicit in this war through my ignorance. I don’t even know if I could find Iraq on a map. I know nothing about the Iraqi language, nothing about Iraqi culture. It is shameful. I am going to learn Arabic.”

He knew rather quickly that he was unlikely to follow through on this bold statement. Where would he learn Arabic in Rochester, and how would he find the time? Part of him realized that he was salving his conscience with a declaration of good intentions.

More than a year later, Dardess came home from work to find a flyer on his dinner plate announcing that a mosque in Rochester was offering classes in Arabic. His wife, Peggy Rosenthal, remembered his impulsive declaration and had noticed the flyer at their neighborhood food co-op. That flyer seemed to call his bluff. Dardess realized that what was keeping him from learning Arabic wasn’t a lack of time or opportunity. It was fear—fear of those unknown people called Muslims.

But now he was more afraid of his bad conscience if he didn’t follow through on his stated intention. With trepidation, he made his way to the mosque. Would the Muslims there accept him? What would they think of his desire to learn Arabic? Dardess, who had converted to Catholicism in the 1980s, turned out to be the only Christian in the room; he sat among 30 Muslims, most of them Bangladeshi and Pakistani immigrants.

That was the beginning of a long process of learning the language and building friendships. Within several months, Dardess could recite portions of the Qur’an in Arabic and say a few prayers. The Qur’an is usually sung, not read, so he had to stretch his shaky singing voice around Arabic consonants and vowels.

Before September 11, 2001, Dardess's interest in Arabic, the Qur'an and his Muslim neighbors seemed at best quirky to his fellow Christians. After 9/11, his knowledge became an urgently needed resource. He started giving workshops on Islam—which he continues to do for churches and ecumenical groups. In 2005, he wrote *Meeting Islam: A Guide for Christians*. He followed that with *Do We Worship the Same God? Comparing the Bible and the Qur'an*. He's now writing a book that looks for ways to include art and poetry in interfaith dialogue.

When he speaks to Christian groups, Dardess notices that participants are often made anxious by the topic. It usually isn't long before someone blurts out, "But what about bin Laden?" Dardess's role has become as much pastoral as informational. "This is not an intellectual issue for people. They are frightened, just as I myself used to be." When it comes to facing Muslims, many Christians, he thinks, are like the disciples who locked themselves in a room after Jesus' death, living in a self-made prison.

Dardess frequently breaks into Qur'anic chants during conversation when he is trying to remember a particular word or phrase in Arabic, but he is careful to respect the boundaries between faiths—something he believes is crucial to interfaith work. Only once, he says, has he ever prayed the *salat* (one of the five daily recitations of prayer that are required of Muslims) with his "Muslim brothers." On this particular day he had just found out about a family member's health crisis. Distressed and preoccupied, he returned to the mosque with his Muslim friends after a meeting, and when they went in for prayer he found himself following them. There was no one else in the mosque at the time, and it seemed the most natural thing to pray with them. "Prayer just at that time was a great consolation to me," he says. "But what made that possible was our deep friendship and the fact that we were alone in that space. I wasn't making a public confession of faith. I haven't done it since. I'm just grateful to God I was able to do it at least once.

"You can't force the kingdom," Dardess says. "The kingdom of God is definitely where we are going. But I know I am not in a position to make it come any faster than it will come."