

Transcript

Interviewee: Yahya Frederickson

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Where: New Center for Multidisciplinary Studies at MSU Moorhead.

Tim Jorgensen: So, Yahya Frederickson. Could you tell me when and where you were born?

Yahya Frederickson: Yes, I was born in...I was born in Nashville, Tennessee, actually on December 25th 1962.

TJ: Alright

YF: My father who was living here in Moorhead at the time, was on sabbatical. He was a professor here and, ah, he went to a college called Peabody College, which is now part of [sic Vanderbilt], and, ah, was working on his doctorate when an unexpected bundle of joy came to the Frederickson house (Tim laughs) on Christmas.

Lindsey Evenson: You were born on Christmas?

YF: I was born on Christmas.

LE: Wow.

YF: My mother was in labor on Christmas!

LE: Oh, poor thing. (Laughing)

TJ: Is your ethnicity Scandinavian, like most of us around here?

YF: Pretty much yeah, yeah. I've got a Danish grandmother, second generation, a, um, Norwegian grandfather, and a Swedish grandmother, and a Swedish grandfather. So yes, Scandinavian, you could say.

TJ: Huh. Well, that fits in around here.

YF: Yep it'd fit in.

TJ: What are your titles in the community here?

YF: Well, I'm an assistant professor here at MSUM. I've been teaching here since 1999 and I'm, so with that I have degree...educational degrees of...I have a Ph.D. from the University of North Dakota in English and I also have a Master of Fine Arts degree in poetry from the University of Montana, and...I did my Bachelors degree here, at that time Moorhead State University, and graduated in 1985. So I guess those are titles that are the closest to me. Um, I have been a member of the executive committee at the local Islamic Center as well. However, I'm not serving at the moment. [That] was a couple years ago.

TJ: And before you got any titles you were a, ah, little teenager running around?

YF: I was... I went through that teenage stage, yes.

TJ: Yeah? What was your childhood like?

YF: It was O.K., I guess. I grew up here in south Moorhead and I think I was... I hadn't traveled too much with my family other than being born in Nashville. Um, and a few... a couple family trips. So I think I grew up wanting to see what other parts of the world, and parts of the country were like so I think when I got to be a...when I hit those teenage years I think I was interested in getting out a little bit and seeing what else was around or what other possibilities there were. That continued...that feeling grew and grew and as I went to college here at MSUM and I...eventually I did get out. I went on this national student exchange program here at MSUM for... I went for two quarters to the University of Oregon in 1984 and that was the beginning of a very important formative period of my life when I was travelling quite a bit.

TJ: Mmmhmm. How long did you live in Nashville? When did your family move?

YF: They were just down for a year because my dad had a year leave. He was on sabbatical for a year.

TJ: O.K.

YF: ...from the University. He was a Health/PE professor here and a coach, so he had a year off to work on his doctorate. I don't remember it very much. (group laughter)

TJ: No.

YF: My parents keep reminding me of that. [Taking on parental voice] "Well, you were there, don't you remember?" But I don't.

TJ: Ah...So you had been around the U.S. a little bit on some trips.

YF: With my family?

TJ: With your family.

YF: We went just before the Arab oil embargo in '74... '74-75. Um, we took a long trip to Florida in the...in the station wagon to visit my mother's parents who lived down there. So, I saw the country that way I guess, from the back of a station wagon, on that trip. But otherwise we were in Minnesota most of the time where my parents have a lake cabin...still do to this day and um...we got around, we went down, we had relatives in Minneapolis also. So that was the extent of my travels before, ah, before I started college, before I was in college.

TJ: O.K. So you hadn't been outside of the US un...

YF: Nnno. No, I hadn't even been to Canada.

TJ: Oh. When was your first time getting outside of the U.S.?

YF: That came after...after I had done the national student exchange and then after I had traveled east with, ahh, an "intimate other" shall we say, after I graduated. I was there for a few months, and then I went to graduate school in the University of Montana. So I just started spinning farther and farther away from Moorhead...until I had finished my Masters degree in Montana with a degree in poetry, and as you probably know there aren't...there isn't a great call for corporate poets out there...so what I decided to do, I started looking at the Peace Corps as a possibility and it was at Montana where they had, they actually had an office, a Peace Corps office on campus and I...I started looking at that as a real possibility...a way of seeing the world, experiencing other places, and doing something that had value, I think. So, I applied and I interviewed and I got fingerprinted and I went through all the security checks and...and um...in...and waited, and then by...in 1989 I joined, I was in the Peace Corps. I passed the recruiting steps I guess and... and they said...where... They ask you to rank which, which continent you'd like to work in, you know. So you rank the continents: Africa, South America, Asia...as if, as if there's some similarity. You know, if you put down Africa there's some shared experience you know... I mean there are tons of different cultures and situations in Africa, you know. But they ask you to do that and it's kind of bogus, but they do and...

So, so I thought it was really funny that...that they ask you those things. But I did, and um, I think I actually chose Africa first and well...Asia is big, I'll choose that second and...ok, South America third. I didn't really have any clue as to where I wanted to go or...it didn't really matter I think. I just wanted the experience. So they called me back and they said, "How about Yemen?" and I said, "O.K. Where is it? Which one of my continents is it in?" Um...I honestly didn't even know where it was, if it was in Africa or in Asia...and I found out it was in... it was barely in Asia, it was close to...I guess the edge between Africa and Asia and the Arabian peninsula south of Saudi Arabia and that was my first time outside of the US and I was there in 1989 and '90, but then there was a little problem in the gulf that pulled me out. The Gulf War was started and...and we were all evacuated after that first year. Usually a Peace Corps service is two years. So I had served one, but then we got evacuated by the US government...even though there really were no direct threats to us. In fact my students invited me to stay in their houses with them. [Speaking in a student voice] "You don't have to go, teacher. Why don't you stay

with us? You'll be safe. There's no problem here." And I...I actually trusted them. I mean I would have...I believed that that would have been the case. We never had any problems walking around the capital city at all but I think our administration at the time was very concerned after the Iran hostage thing after the Iranian revolution and they just played it safe and evacuated everybody if they were in danger or not. There's just too much liability in...and potential problems I think.

So... I came back here. I was suddenly dropped back in Fargo-Moorhead after enjoying a year of what I found...what has become a very...the most formative period of my life, my time in Yemen. So...so after I came back here 19...was it '90...summer of 1990, I guess. Yeah, and for one year I was...I was back here and I actually was able to teach here on...at the university as just kinda...because there were...enrollments were the largest enrollments that the university had ever had during that period. So they needed extra English teachers so...so I taught and then the Peace Corps kept in touch with me. I kept in touch with them...and when they...things had quieted down...they said "Would...are you interested in coming back and finishing your service?" and I said "Yes I am" and there were four of us out of about thirty whose lives hadn't you know...ground us into the daily routine of...of paying bills and paying back student loans and stuff. So four of us went back out of the thirty to finish our second year and um I liked it so much that I actually stayed. I got another job in Yemen doing basically the same thing, teaching at the...at Sana'a University in the capital city. But I got...I got paid more. I got paid a real salary and not a volunteer stipend. So, I stayed for four more years. I stayed a total of six years in Yemen. I ended up getting married there eventually and having twins there and I came back here in 1996 to work on my doctorate at UND. So...it's still a time...those six years are still... it's still the period of my life where I always reflect upon and if there's a moment to daydream it usually goes back to something in that time period.

TJ: Hmm. You mentioned that was a formative time. Did you change your name from...

YF: That was...Yeah, that's something that came out of that period as well. After my first year in...During my first year in Yemen and in the Peace Corps I started...I was really interested in the faith of the people there because Yemen is 99% Muslim and from the very...from the first days we were there with the Peace Corps you know there would be ...the calls to prayer that would start what, in what seemed to be the middle of the night. Just the...the loud but hauntingly beautiful call to prayer, the "*Allahu akbar, Allahu akbar*" in the dark and you'd wake up because you've never been awakened by anything in the middle of the night like that before. So you wake...I remember us all in our, in our dormitories while we were being trained in. We had...it sounded like the mosque was right next door (laughs) and so the call to prayer was the loudspeakers were blasting in our direction it sounded like and um we woke up and we thought "Ohh noo." Our whole...out two years of service, every day is gonna be like this!" you know?...pull our fingernails out of the ceiling from this loud sound, you know? Umm, but ahh...It turned out to be something that I really grew to appreciate despite my apprehension and distrust of it at the beginning.

I...what I saw was a society very...one of the poorest countries in the world. It's not like the Gulf that has a lot of wealth. It's one of the poorest in the world actually. But

I saw people who were...who were very devout, who had closed their shops and go to the mosque when the call to prayer went off during the day during the one of the five times during the day. They would, they'd just close things up or maybe they would just leave. They didn't often bolt the doors of their shop shut or anything. They just walked down the street to the mosque you know, knowing that people weren't going to do anything to the shop while he...while he was gone. Or maybe the shopkeeper would leave his old mother in the shop to watch for him, or his ten year-old son. Just sit him on the chair there and for those ten minutes while he was gone. Then he'd come back ...and there was a security that was present in Sana'a at that time that was very...very intriguing to someone from the United States where we'd lock everything down and bolt things up and are always concerned about safety of children and...it wasn't as big of an issue there as it is here and I was intrigued by that difference. And I realize that...later, that it was... their faith that, that let that be possible.

There were, there were other things as well...the way that people could sit and talk with neighbors. They had time to do that. They weren't running, running, running all day long...there was a social value, a social value to sitting with people and discussing things, having conversations and...again, very intriguing when you look at...when I looked at our culture here, even in a small place like Moorhead where, which is much more laid back than a place like Chicago. Even here you feel like you're running quite a bit...and it was nice to see that there were alternatives to that lifestyle.

So I was interested in how the faith of these people would direct, would allow them to live that way and um... so I started studying ah, reading, ah about Islam and reading a translation of the meaning of the Koran as well, their holy book. And it was during that time when...after about a year I was really...I even fasted during Ramadan before I had become a Muslim. There's a month of fasting and...you don't eat during the daylight hours and it's usually...there's a lot of extra prayers at night and ...it was during that year, that first year in Yemen that I really started to think "You know, my life has been missing some kind of spiritual grounding." I'd been looking for something. I'd been looking for something to believe in and something to...to use. You know, a faith that will direct your life, not just direct your faith. You know to...something that will allow your spiritual life and your...your bodily life to be connected more than it was...because I hadn't felt that it had ever been really truly connected every minute of every day. It was connected for a few hours on Sunday maybe, or maybe one hour on Sunday and at various times, you know, during my life for a few moments at a time but I wanted...I was looking for something more than that, more of a connection and...and I felt after a year, talking and reading, and practicing, that it was something that would help me and make me feel happy and make me feel confident and umm give me a sense of purpose that I hadn't had before.

So that's another way that this, that period was another very formative one because it was a kind of a spiritual awakening that was going on in me at the time and...after that first year I came, when I was dropped back in Fargo-Moorhead I was, you know, at a time when I really, I was...I had never wanted to stay in a place more than I had in Yemen at that time, so it was...it was...I was disappointed in having to leave...probably more than anyone else in my group, because of what was going on inside. But I, you know, what can you do? You drop back...In a way I saw it as a possible advantage too, to see if this exotic religion that I was getting interested in is

something that would be applicable in the place I grew up because...or maybe I'm just...I'm just being seduced by the exoticism of my experience and it's not really something to...to take seriously. So I came back and...had a lot of culture shock as I was watching the news every day looking at some people called Muslims, killing other people called Muslims, you know...in Kuwait. Between Kuwait and Iraq, the two sides that were the most affected by the Gulf War and my...the country of my origin...in the middle.

So, it was a strange time and...but during that year I found a mosque here in Fargo-Moorhead. I had...I had grown up here and never knew there was a group of Muslims or much less, a mosque here...and sure enough in North Fargo, close to NDSU there has... there was an apartment that was rented by Muslim students and it was a mosque that they met at when they wanted to perform their prayers and...I ran into a Saudi Arabian guy who later became a friend of mine at a book...a book store. There was a poetry reading and he was there and I could tell just from looking at him that he was Arab, and so I came up around the bookshelves to him, and I...I laid a little Arabic on him, and his eyes got really big...he just wasn't expecting (laughing) any kind of Arabic in a bookstore in Fargo...and he has become a...he's still a friend of mine. He's back in Saudi Arabia now but, he was my first connection here and he told me about the mosque and introduced me to the people in it and I guess I've been connected ever since. So it was a good time for me to sort of sit back and think, you know, is this working? Is this really what I'm interested in...and it turned out that it was. I kept reading and studying and practicing and learning...talking to my newfound friends and...after...by December of 1991...no, December of 1990 actually...it was.

So it was about a year and a half I guess of learning and just observing people in Yemen, and then back here. I...I officially became a Muslim in just a very simple procedure...in which the person who's interested recites what is called the *shihadatayn*, a testimonial that...just agreeing to the precepts of the faith and just kind of saying, "O.K., you have witnesses as you do this. You've said the two sentences that you need to say that shows that you're serious about Islam and you believe in its premises," and that's it. So, um, I recited the *shihadatayn*, the two testimonials, in December of 1990. And I guess I've been continuing on ever since and trying to develop and cultivate myself in the faith. So, yeah I trace it all back to that year in Yemen, that first year, and the subsequent years too.

TJ: How has your family reacted to that?

YF: Yeah, well at first my parents, ahh...I grew up going to a Protestant church here in town and...but I wouldn't...my parents have...they're moral people but I wouldn't say that they're overly religious. I mean, going to church wasn't an absolute must in my family, once I got confirmed. And it had been about that time when I stopped going to church, which is kind of ironic. You know, you get confirmed and you think it's the beginning and in fact, for me, it was kind of the curtains were closing instead. So, during the Gulf War you know, it was a strange time because I was under...you know...having a lot of thoughts about my purpose in life and what I wanted and where I wanted to be. And meanwhile, my...you know, my parents are seeing those same newscasts every day of "Muslims killing Muslims" and you know, violent, ... those "violent" (sarcasm) people and ...those "zealots" and those "blanks" and, you know? So, it was...I thought of

that...I didn't tell them right away what I had been thinking about because I wasn't sure of myself, so what am I going to tell them?

I wanted to be sure and talk to them in the right way, after I was completely sure about what I was doing. And when that time came, in...after, that December--testimonial time-- I found the right time when my dad was...I was gonna head to talk to my dad first...because I can talk to him a little easier. My mom cries quicker, so...(group laugh). And I went to talk to my dad first and he was in his workshop downstairs. I knew he was alone down there so I...I went down there...and talked to him about it, and in the end he was, you know, confused by it, surprised by it. I told him, "You know, I know you don't know very much about this faith. You see it from a distance, but you haven't had much direct experience with it. So I know it's probably really confusing to you. I'm still your son and I think that I'll be much happier in this faith. From what I know so far, it'll make me a better person and a better son as well." [Continues addressing interviewer] Because there are a lot of duties that a son has to parents: keeping by them when they need help, when they're older, giving...showing them respect and such. So I kind of knew that they'd probably be happy with it once they understood it more. But, what they had seen from the media and from their faraway vantage point, they probably wouldn't understand it and... I don't, you know?! I told my dad in parting, you know, "Go by, look at my actions and I hope if you...since you don't know what Islam is, yet I hope my actions will show you what it is."

And, you know, it's been good, I think, ever since. I don't think he's had many complaints about it. My wife and I have their only grandchildren and their only married children, in me, and we're here, and my other [siblings], my brother and sister, are farther away and just aren't able to come and visit very often. We eat with them [YF's parents] every single day, they're with us and we want them around because my religion teaches me to have them around because they're... there's wisdom in age and there's honor that I need to show them for all that they've done for me. When I was bawling in the middle of the night and teething and, you know, filling my diapers, and stuff and that's a big thing that they did. And I have to...you know, we have to realize that. They cleaned my bottom for a long time, you know? And there's a payback for that when you get older. So, I trace all those values that I have back to the faith that I've found, and I think they've come to terms with that and are quite satisfied with it, strange as it was.

TJ: Your siblings and parents and other members of the community must have come to you on or shortly after September 11, 2001. I remember thinking about you when that happened and I thought, "Oh, Yahya is gonna be getting some questions." (YF laughs) What kind of things came your way?

YF: Yeah, and at that time I was on...I was the secretary of the executive committee of the Islamic Center too. So I was the media connection and...yeah, we got calls from...from the local media and television and radio and newspaper and I thought, "Oh no, here we go." You know, I remember...I think every Muslim in this country thought at the beginning, you know...when it first happened, before they knew the perpetrators, you know, "Please don't let it be Muslims. Please don't it be Muslims." But it turned out to be men mostly from Arab countries, who were, in fact...who had called themselves Muslims. So yeah, I...We thought, you know, "it's been hot enough and now it's gonna

get really hot and...it did in a way.” Ahh, I don’t think so much here [in F-M]. It was surprising that it didn’t. I had, like I think I had one crank call on my answering machine at work one day... and that was because I had mistakenly given my phone number to the press, and they had...they had broadcast it on the television and I hadn’t...that wasn’t my intention. I wanted to give it to the reporter in case they had questions and then there I saw it on the screen. I thought “Oh nooo” (laughs) But um, it was just one. I mean, just one and it wasn’t terribly bad...I mean so, one is one, you know?

TJ: Was it creative even?

YF: Um, not really. Just kind of...not that creative. Um, so we expected more. There was an incident in...outside of our Islamic Center that...kind of a strange murky incident in which a group of...Euro-American youth drove into our parking lot at our Islamic Center in south Fargo and...and opened up the trunk and there was a...apparently a shotgun or a rifle there and there were some members around who saw somebody, one of them pick it up and then say to the other one “I can’t do this,” and they put it back in and got in their car and drove away. So, you know, it’s just the strange thinking. You know, those were the worst things that happened and...that we know of...that has been reported to us anyway and there were a lot of surprisingly good things too. I mean, we’d go to the mosque and...and there would be bouquets of flowers wrapped around the doorknob for us...you know, by people who were supportive of us in the community, who wanted to say, you know, “We understand you’re under pressure right now, in the public eye and we want to say we’re”...they wanted to show us some kind of solidarity with us and sympathy for our situation. So, it was really...I think those kind of incidences...those kind of incidents were far greater than...than the ugly ones. We had cards and flowers and you know, people were sending me emails from different parts of the community and it was really very supportive here in town and...For me, you know, if I go to the supermarket, I can blend in and people don’t know that I’m a Muslim because I’m Scandinavian-American they might think the beard is a little weird but, you know, other than that they won’t think twice. But you know, if you think about the majority of the Muslims in the area who do stand out, who are not invisible by any means...the Somali refugees, the Kurdish refugees, the Sudanese refugees, the Bosnians...they fit...they can become, kind of go into the crowd too a bit, the Bosnians. They all stand out more than, more than I do and we were more concerned about their well-being than...I was more concerned about them than myself, you know. And my wife who’s from...from Ethiopia and Yemen...you know, also looks very African and covers her hair and dresses in an Islamic way and you know, I was certainly concerned about her when she went out.

But it...those early few weeks of concerns sort of melted away and things were pretty quiet. But we’ve had a lot of requests for information. You know, we’ve gotten called to speak, you know [Playing the role of a church member] “Can you send a speaker to our church to talk about Islam?” We have a lot of those from big churches here in town and from little country churches in the middle of cornfields and surrounding areas. [again] “Can you...You know, we’re really curious about this faith that’s in the news so much now, but we don’t know anything about it. Can somebody come out and talk to us about it?” So, myself and several others would fit these things into our schedule and talk because...well it’s our duty to talk about our faith too and just to inform people

about it, so we were happy to have an opportunity to do that and... so there's some strange benefits that sort of came out of the catastrophe too, you know. Um, because you always try to look at the good side of thing too, you know...but.

LE: Were these Protestant churches?

YF: Umm...the ones that I have gone to have been Protestant, yeah. Mmhmm. Various denominations of Protestant.

LE: Mmmhmm

YF: Well, and there are a lot of Lutheran churches here and ahh. I think most of the ones I have been to have been Lutheran, but not all of them. But I don't know...maybe other people [Muslim speakers] have gone to Catholic churches too...I'm not sure.

TJ: With your...With Muslim and the religion, I've read, in America as being maybe five or six million strong.

YF: Yes

TJ: and...locally anywhere, I've read reports between 500 and 2,000. But it's on the rise, is that correct?

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TJ: I've read that it's on the rise and my question is that, with the increasing presence in America and maybe even in the F-M community where it's maybe not so well known, How do you approach explaining it to people when you speak and give lectures?

Y: Well...I think there, up until now, there hasn't been much information about it... Because it's been so...kind of a distance thing but now isn't distant, there are people like I see in Wal-Mart or K-Mart or grocery store that... that come and are obviously from a different culture and also a different faith from the way they dress...the size of family with them and the way that they carry themselves and things that are involved in and the languages that they speak. So I think people are curious about their neighbors that they don't know, in a way, here...locally I'm speaking. And because we are...Fargo-Moorhead is about 120,000 or so right now from Dilworth to West Fargo so were getting bigger but were still kind of a small town, too. And I think people are curious and they're not as...suspicious of people, I think, as they might be if they were in a larger city, like in Minneapolis or something they see somebody different and are like "Uurrr!" you know: "Who are they? What do they want here? And why are they here?" But here people are more... they are more generally interested and in others and uumm...and so they are curious about those neighbors, I think that is one reason why we get called. Another reason is just hearing the news they want to be able to understand better what is going on and what would motivate people to do such a thing...and by the way I don't think that their faith does give any answers as to why they would do such a thing think a lot of

Muslims are still are still trying to think that through as how somebody could do 9-11 and at the same time profess to being a strong devout Muslim following the rules of Islam because there is no real connection between the two that can be found, there's not much... there's no support for that kind of thing.

TJ: But does it seem the extremists that are ruining it for the rest of the population?

Y; A lot of my friends and Muslim leaders had stated that much. They've said, you know, the planes were hijacked but it also feels like our religion has been hijacked because the issue isn't trying to explain...and trying to live peacefully in this country...uh...but it's...it's [that] we're on the defensive now. And the issue isn't about faith; it's about this representation of our faith that everybody has now: this...the violence and repressiveness of the religion that they see. And umm, so we're having to shift our stage a little bit and deal with all the negative stereotypes that have resulted from people inside that have done something and claimed to be Muslim. So we feel like our purpose has been sort of hijacked and were still recovering from that and the effects from it.

TJ: How do you see the F-M Community as meeting the needs of the culture that you've come to know?

Y; Well, I think the proof is out there. I mean if it weren't meeting the needs, then the people who are settled here in refugee programs and such wouldn't stay. Knowing that fact that they are staying in the area must mean that something is comfortable for them, because they are here. I mean, yes, there are some who go to Minneapolis or larger cities and elsewhere for education or economic reasons but...I think the amount of leaving isn't any different from the European-Americans who also go to Minneapolis to work and relocate. So I think that speaks for itself here. There are little things about dietary requirements and, you know, because in Islam we have a similar dietary ruling, like you might be familiar with Jews who have kosher, in Islam there's also a version called *halal* food, which deals with animals and how they are slaughtered for meat. There's a prayer that is supposed to be said as the slaughtering is done. It's supposed to be done a certain way and those little things are things that the community itself has sort of stepped into to provide, so I can get halal meat in Fargo in a couple different locations now because immigrants have started businesses that sell it and also a lot of farmers in the area have found a new market. But if they raise these animals and in ways that allow us to slaughter them and provide for us, provide a place for us to slaughter them ourselves on their farms, they can sell more livestock. And if they raise more goats--which is kind of a favorite of many people in developing countries and certainly in a lot of Muslims--they can sell a lot of goats to people like us! A market that they never used to have. Sheep, beef, pigs, you know, but we're giving them a new market as well and a new product to sell if they choose to do so. So I think there seems to be some positive interaction there between farmers and new immigrants, which might seem kind of strange and counterintuitive that they would have anything to share at all. But in fact that exists.

TJ: Is the Muslim community finding a unity with each other, that they come together in this area different countries and backgrounds and there's professionals here, there's refugees here, all levels of society?

Y: Yeah, and America is great that way... ahh... you can stand in a mosque praying with people from all over the world, either first- or second-generation Americans, or maybe third generation, or what have you. And they are all standing there together and you, from all completely different cultures. That you share a culture of religion and that's what binds you together. Umm...In other countries you're not going to find that as much, there might be a few people from other countries, expatriates who are living in a particular country, but most of them are from that country. So America is, is kind of interesting, to be more in the spirit of our faith, you know that it's our faith that binds us together and not anything else.

So there is a constant reminder of that...Umm...on the other hand...there are some difficulties too when everybody is from a different place, especially when they are recently from that different place. What language are you going to speak? Arabic is the language of the Qur'an and of the religion but people have studied it to varying degrees...umm...so they may not be able to have conversations in it. They may be able to read the Qur'an in it, but they may not be able to speak and talk about their job or what they did last week with it. So what do you do? I mean, we have people whose level of English proficiency is quite low and others who are very articulate in English and perhaps several other languages, and how do you get to know each other, you know? You smile at each other at the Islamic Center after a prayer and, you know, there's not much that you can do after that.

So I think that a challenge we have is to unify because there are different cultural takes on what Islam means, too, in their home countries. There are varying degrees of application of the practices of the Prophet [Muhammad]...um...of dress, of the halal dietary code, of...knowledge, and now they are all mixed together and this one says, "Well, this is right because I did it at home," you know, "this is the way my parents taught me so it's right." And this one from another country says the same thing and says, "No, you're wrong because I did it *this* way." So hopefully what it means is when we can converse more about it, we have to...uhh...we can say, well, where does this tradition in our home country come from? What can you point to in the Qur'an that says that this is the way it should be done? What can you point to in the practices and traditions of the Prophet Muhammad that this comes from, you know? If we are knowledgeable about that we're not just going to accept what we do...umm...as right. We're going to be able to look back at the sources and see where these things are coming from.

So I hope again that it will make us stronger in the end...to...to be looking at ourselves more critically and finding out where those things come from. But then we're all so busy, and when are you going to have time to talk things like that? We have new immigrants here who are working back-breaking jobs because their country was in civil war when they were in junior high school, you know, what kind of education are they going to have? And then they are in a new country where their language is secondary or perhaps tertiary. What job are they going to get? So they are working really hard jobs, crazy hours maybe several jobs and...umm...when are they going to

have time to get together with others, you know, that's another issue. So I guess in the end because we are all Muslims we are trying to help each other and understand that and doing our best to understand each other, but it's a struggle for sure. It's a struggle.

TJ: To some degree it's seems that it's a matter of whether that's tolerated in this area or whether it's valued: the people, what are you seeing people doing. You mention the example of ah, farming to meet the needs of the halal diet. Um, that might just be for financial gain for the farmer.

Y: Sure, yeah, but I think agriculture has been an economic...you know, it's been concerned with economics from the beginning, and I think they have to be, from what I understand. I'm not a farmer, and I don't mean to speak for them but I think that the more economically savvy a farmer is, the better off he or she will be, and the more successful, and the farmers have had to be more economically savvy. So yeah, it's a win-win situation regarding that example I think. They get their halal goat, and the farmers get some, um, economic benefit too, and that's what makes interaction fun; people benefit both ways

TJ: Through education they'll learn to value it...

Y: And through experience too I think, having the fact that they...their economy brings them together, and their needs bring them together. That's what builds community, I think, so I think it will be a positive for the area, and it doesn't make people feel like outsiders so much then. They feel the need for someone else, there's that interaction that's developed, and I'm sure it's developed in many other ways besides farming, I think, in other areas such as higher education or secondary education, or any age really. You know you have students in classes who weren't there before, and um, it puts some pressure on the teachers and the administrators of public schools to know what the needs of those children are, and what their beliefs are, um, but, uh, I think in the end the exposure is valuable also, so that other kids can see what these immigrants their parents might be talking about [are like], or what they might be seeing now and then around town, what they're like when you sit next to them in a class, you know, get to know them and the younger ones' English is much more proficient than the older ones, so, they are the mediators between the two cultures. So I think that the experience is most valuable, the fact that there is chances to interact and I think that brings more understanding to each side.

TJ: You'd recommend studying abroad I'd imagine...

Y: Yeah, I recommend studying abroad, I'm a proponent of that.

TJ: Could you tell me more about your role and your current involvement with the Islamic Center in Fargo, when it began and...

Y: Well it started when I, as I mentioned, when I found out about it, back in 1990. I found out that it was there. The building has since changed, uh, a larger building has

been purchased, and uh, so it's not just an apartment in, uh, in a big house; it's a building by itself. It's been interesting to have seen it at that early stage over ten years ago and what it's like now, with all the influx of so many immigrants and refugees, because we're the only Islamic Center in the area, so people come to our holidays from far away places in North Dakota, Pelican Rapids, from all over the place, Crookston. People come down to celebrate our holidays together, so, um, we're really in need of a larger building in some ways, even though we haven't had it all that long, so, um, it's been nice to see that growth, its growth has sort of mirrored mine in my history in the faith as well, so it's been fun to be a part of it, um, and uh, to see the struggles that people go through in this place that I've always called home is also kind of an interesting vantage point.

TJ: How many people are now a part of the Islamic community?

Y: Well, it depends on how you define "part" (laughs)! There are very large turnouts for our two holidays a year, which are called *Eid*, we have *Eid al-Fitr*, which marks the end of the month of fasting Ramadan and, um, we also have *Eid al-Adha*, which comes at the end of the *Hajj* season. Muslims from around the world to go to Mecca, Saudi Arabia, to perform the stations of the pilgrimage which we're supposed to do once in our lifetime if we're physically and economically capable of doing so. And it goes on a lunar calendar so I can't say that it's always in December or always in March or something. It rotates, because the lunar month and the solar year that we're used to are in different lengths. So it rotates; it gets about ten days earlier each year, um, so we have large turnouts on those. We are like sardines on those days, which is nice, um and we've been...our space has been too small for it so that we've rented banquet rooms in some of the area hotels just to have enough space for everyone just to come. On a day to day level, people, uh, the amount of people who come is quite a bit smaller than that. The people who live near the mosque, or the Islamic center, might be able to come several times a day. Uh, but you know, if you live farther away, your house is farther away, and your work is somewhere else, and such, it's harder to get away and pray in the mosque, as we're encouraged to do as many times as we can.

So potentially a person could go to the mosque five times a day, and when I was in Yemen I could do that because there were mosques all over the place, and um, including near my house. But here we have one that it takes me about 15 minutes to get to, you know, and it's, when there's three feet of snow outside and (laughs) it's below zero, it's a little bit more of a challenge to do that kind of thing. If I can get over there once, I'm doing really well! I think in our registry, where people have actually registered as members of the Islamic Society of Fargo-Moorhead, and so that they can vote in our elections for, ah, executives, there might be 200 to 300, max. But we know that there are a lot, it's a tip of an iceberg, you know. There are possibly thousands underneath who are here and come to our *Eid* celebrations but do not give the \$5 registration membership fee to the Islamic Center. And that's fine too; I mean, there's no requirement for that. If you're a Muslim, you're a Muslim, you know? So we don't want to get too hard about membership, although we'd like to have a better sense about how many there are so we can provide for them better. That's an ongoing struggle.

TJ: Are there celebrations, or the events something that the Muslim community wants other... the communities to experience, is it something open like Cinco de Mayo, that we are invited to go experience what it's like?

Y: Well, yeah that's of course a secular holiday too, like July 4th would be, whereas this is uh, a religious event that the Muslims participate in. Um yes, it is, we have guests that come; it's not a problem. Sometimes a Muslim has a friend who's curious about what we do, and so the friend is brought to our, one of our, either to our building or to our Friday prayer. We have a congregational prayer on Friday. It is important for us to attend. This week, as a matter of fact, there was someone there who was obviously not a Muslim, and um, was a guest of one of our members. We've had religion classes come with a professor and sit in the back, from area high schools, and from colleges as well, just to see what it's like, what is it, how do Muslims pray, how does it work, just sit there and watch us. So yeah, we're, anything we can do for people to understand what we do better is not a problem. We like to do that, as a matter of fact.

TJ: Okay. Currently you're a teacher here at the New Center?

Y: Yes.

TJ: Could you explain how you got involved with the New Center?

Y: Well, in 1990, I was back [from one year of Peace Corps service in Yemen], and some of the professors who I'd had as a undergraduate and who knew that I had gone on to get a Masters in Creative Writing, um, knew that I was around and available, nothing to do, and they also knew that the enrollments were huge here at the university, so they put two and two together, and they said, "Hey, we've got some extra classes and you might apply for these, to teach these." So that was my start. And, um, through the English Department I found out about an opening here at the New Center as well, a night class, so I accepted to teach that too. That was my first contact with the New Center. I guess I'd known some people who had been students here, from friends of mine from high school, but that was about it. Before that, um, and then when I finished my Ph.D., actually while I was finishing it in 1999, there was an opening here too, so I applied again. Because I had worked here before, I thought I would have my foot a little further in the door than others might, and I'd liked working here, so, um, I applied again and got that position. One thing led to another, and now I'm on tenure track here, so, I believe there's a couple years before that [tenure] review comes. So far, so good!

TJ: Good luck with that.

Y: Thank you.

TJ: And you've had some writings published?

Y: Yes, I've had some poetry published and some book reviews.

TJ: I read your poems you gave me...

Y: Hmm...

TJ: And they deal largely with the times you spent on the other side of the Atlantic.

Y: Yeah, they do. I've got a whole book of poems about my experiences with Yemen alone that I'm trying to market these days. And, uh, like I say, that formative period also shows itself in my creative work, because I had a lot to think about when I was there and a lot to see that was different. And, um, that's the kind of thing that writing is made of: when you're faced with something that is outside your bubble of experience. So I've spent a lot of time doing that, working on that. But I think, as I look at...you know, if I'd gone anywhere else too, or if I'd gone somewhere else after those years in Yemen, I'd be writing about that experience too, you know, because travel puts you in that situation wherever you go. It's wonderful subject matter, um, for self-discovery and creativity, so, I've also got poems from my trips to Tunisia, and Ethiopia, and Greece, and Canada, and Mexico. And I see a pattern there, and I think Yemen was just a larger chunk of kind of the same interest I have in experience. Travel, more than anything else I can think of, can bring poetry. Autobiographical? Um, they are, I think. I don't create other characters. They are usually about me or something going on around me, kind of observational. But, uh, not autobiographical in a Sylvia Plath kind of sense. I don't feel like I'm baring more than I should in any of my poems. I feel comfortable with them and the discovery I try to recreate in them. Did you like them?

TJ: Yeah, they, I, uh, it's my kind of poetry.

Y: It is? What did you like about them?

TJ: Well, it, um, it reminded me of the past semester I spent in Norway. I reflect on that culture. I don't write aside from the journal, but I can see how you came up with what you came up with.

Y: Yeah. It starts in the journals, doesn't it?

TJ: Yep. Uh, in commenting on your poem, your...

Y: Uh, "Praying Beside a Mujahed"?

TJ: In commenting on that poem, you mention that you don't believe you could become Yemeni, even if you wanted to, after six years of being there, that you experience a blur between being an observer and a participant.

Y: Yeah, I think it blurred somewhat. I mean, because, in a worse sense, if you were to travel in the worst possible way, you'd just be a tourist. You'd stay in your vehicle, you'd look out the windows, you'd say, "how quaint, how cute," and not really get the interaction. And I think my earlier poems in Yemen and my earlier journal entries were

like that. Like “wow, isn’t that weird?”, or “whoa.” And the longer I stayed there, I found myself understanding better than when I first got there. So I felt, you know, you’re walking among it. You’re walking among the things. After, with, that amount of time in a place--when you’ve got a little bit of the language and a little bit more of understanding and compassion—you’re part of it too. You’re walking in it, you’re observing, I guess; but you’re also among it. So I think you start being more active. And that leads to better poems. And that leads to a more satisfying travel experience, too. I hate to go to some place for, like, a week, you know, because, you’re not going to get a chance to go “wow, cool,” you know? But if you stay in a place for like a year, if you plunk yourself down in a very different location for a year, by the end of that year, you’re going to start to understand what people are like a little bit, you know? It’s a beginning, but it takes about that to get readjusted. And I’m guessing that, if you are coming from a place away from Fargo-Moorhead, you’d probably experienced the same thing when you came for college here, that it takes a year to kind of understand how things go and to feel like you belong some place. And I think that’s the same when you’re overseas. It might be that it would take a little longer because of the language differences.

TJ: Have you encountered the opposite of that with those coming into America with the immigrants and refugees, wondering if they’re ever going to be able to consider themselves completely American?

Y: I think...I think that they probably go through that at least as much if not more, and now with America...America has so many connotations to it, some of which we are happy about and proud of and others that might seem kind of pushy and arrogant to people. And to, uh, become a part of that two-sided coin might take more time than the types of traveling that I or we have done. So I’m sure they go through it quite a bit. On the other hand, if they take a look at the relatives and the friends they have left behind, they’re probably quite grateful to be able to help them a little more too. I mean, people work here and don’t just pocket the money. You know, a lot of immigrants have family back home in dire need, and some of that salary of those backbreaking jobs here gets transferred to relatives back home because they are taking care of people beyond themselves. So I’m sure they’re very conscious of all that stuff, probably more so than we can imagine.

TJ: It seems that you’re often turned to in this community as an authority on Islamic precepts. You get a lot of questions. How do you handle it, as a leadership role almost?

Y: Well, I immediately say that I am not an authority, because I’m not. I’m not a scholar in Islam. I’m not as fluent in Arabic as I’d like to be. I don’t consider myself to be an authority. I am what I am, and I’ve been trying to do my best I can with my twelve years or so in the faith. But I’m not a religious authority. I consult others when I have religious questions to ask. I’m somebody who may be in a way...I can be a mediator between recent immigrants--recent Muslims who are recently here in the area--and people who are not Muslims. I can perhaps offer some insight to people who are not Muslim in this area about my faith, because I know what they’re coming from. I know how they grew up and what they thought, because I thought that too when I grew up that

way too. And I think that is the best thing that I can offer both sides. And it's a very humble offering, but I hope I can.

END OF TAPE/START OF TAPE TWO

Y: Um as I was saying, I hope I can offer myself to the community as somewhat of a mediator, but I think, on the other hand, that position of being between things, between Islam and the non-Muslim Fargo-Moorhead community, I also risk being part of neither. In fact, I can't really know what it's like to be a recent immigrant, a refugee, because I haven't done it. I haven't had that horror that they've lived, and I can never understand it because I haven't done it. On the other hand, I can never completely be a part of the Fargo-Moorhead non-Muslim community because I'm not a non-Muslim any more. I'm... so, you know, you run the risk of separating yourself from both parts that you're trying to bring together, you know? And that's the position of any mediator, I think: being the person between. So, everything's got its plusses and minuses, I guess.

TJ: So, that sounds good.

Lindsey: I know you had a question earlier about...were there any questions about 9-11 that you wanted to answer? Does that make any sense?

TJ: Yeah, it does. Yeah, 9-11 would apply as well. You were undoubtedly asked a lot of questions upon your return from Yemen. What sort of questions did you want to answer that you never got asked?

Y: There are questions that are posed to return Peace Corps volunteers from any place, that are kind of a running gag among Peace Corps volunteers because people are really excited when you..."Oh, you've been in this country or that country for so long," and they want about a thirty-second recap of your two years and then don't really want to hear about it anymore, so...and we just gush about our experiences and how much we grew and developed and the things we did, and nobody wants to hear about it after that thirty seconds. So um, that's pretty common anywhere. I can understand why people don't want us to go on and on, and perhaps that's why I turn to my writing and I hope to keep it going there. And I think there's something valuable in it. Not in small-talk conversations, but, um, but in something that is more meaningful and more lasting.

So, I guess perhaps that's the reason I turn to my writing or direct it towards my writing. I can't think of any questions that I wasn't asked during 9-11. I mean, so much was coming at us that I didn't really want any more to come at us, I mean as far as potential problems that we could have faced. So it was enough to just kind of connect with the media as we had to and answer their questions the best we could. You can't really plan a response, an organized orchestrated response to it, especially on...I mean we tried our best on a local level, just being in touch better with the other executive committee members, I guess, [more] than I have ever been, during that time of calling each other back and forth, "who've you talked to?" and "what kind of questions they've been asking?" and "how can we respond?" and "what do we need to do?" and those type of things. So we were... there was nothing that we could have planned. We just had to

do it at the time. And, you know, *alhamdulillah*, a phrase we say, thank God, you know, praise God for the way the things went, *alhamdulillah* that things went O.K. for us here in the area. And I think the bigger issues, personal rights, are sort of undergoing an erosion since 9-11, with the Attorney General Ashcroft's ideas about how we can make this country more secure. It's tending to infringe upon rights and many of our community members on a national level are affected by that, by those decisions that are being proposed, by the decisions that are being proposed. But again, we're not, on a local level, or, those aren't our issues *per se*. They might affect some of us, but those decisions and the plan is more coming out of places like New York or Washington, the larger cities. There's more of a base.

TJ: Great, OK, I know you [other interviewers] probably want some spellings of these words. I think that sounds good. Does anyone have any other things to bring up? No? O.K. Thank you.

Y: Well, thank you very much.

END OF INTERVIEW