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at home—primarily English, Arabic, and French—and loved sitting at the dinner table while my parents and their friends discussed (in many languages) politics and world affairs. Raised in a multilingual and inter-faith family, I learned to respect different ways of doing things and to be wary of claims of religious, national, or cultural superiority. So perhaps it was only natural that I would develop a passion for international affairs.

I hadn’t really thought about teaching when I entered law school, as I was determined to become (as I told everyone, to their amusement) an “international lawyer.” After my first year, however, inspired by the superb teachers I had at Tulane Law School where I earned my JD, I set upon teaching as a career. I spent several years after graduation honing my skills, including five years of practice in Paris, France, two additional law degrees (from Columbia Law School and the Sorbonne), and three judicial clerkships. By the time I arrived at Washington University in 1992, I was a bilingual international lawyer with extensive experience in international commercial transactions, finance, arbitration, and litigation. I was eager to share my passion and knowledge of international and comparative law with colleagues and students, and excited about the possibility of doing research and scholarship that could contribute to the solution of global problems.

WHAT I COULD NOT HAVE KNOWN as I prepared for my future teaching career is how fortuitous a choice Washington University School of Law would be as my academic home. I moved to St. Louis from Paris in 1992 and had never lived in the Midwest. Over the years, I have grown to love this area of the country. Although the law school’s location in the heartland means that it is less “connected” to the international law and politics communities on the coasts, its location also gives the school a quintessentially American ethos, including friendliness, an openness to

WHY I TEACH

very August, there is a sense of excitement at the law school. Another academic year is poised to begin. During the first and second weeks of the month, the quiet and nearly empty hallways of Anheuser-Busch Hall begin to fill with second- and third-year law students returning early to check on their apartments and work on their job searches, journal assignments, and moot court applications. They reconnect with friends and the larger law school community; many come by to say “hello.” It is wonderful to have them back.

Their arrival means that it is time to put aside whatever research projects I am working on and get out my course materials, anticipating eagerly the start of the new term. I look at my course notes and try to remember what did and did not work, and what new cases and developments need to be added to my syllabus. Orientation begins, and the 1Ls arrive; the sense of excitement is palpable. Laughter is heard in the commons and the hallways, and students finalize their class schedules, thinking about what this experience will mean for them, their families, and their futures.

Suddenly, it is the first day of classes. Course materials ready, roster studied, seating chart prepared, lecture notes in hand, I enter the classroom. I survey the students sitting down, the ones filtering in and looking for seats or for their friends, and the ones discreetly sizing me up. I recognize a few faces, but many are unfamiliar. At eight minutes past the hour, I take a deep breath, look up, smile, and begin class. Another academic year has commenced, and I am reminded why I teach—because it is the most challenging and rewarding job I can imagine.

ALTHOUGH I WAS THE FIRST MEMBER OF MY FAMILY TO STUDY LAW, both of my parents received their doctorates as I was growing up and became university professors. My mother taught history and was an expert in Middle Eastern and European civilizations. My father taught engineering and computer science. Books were everywhere; conversations at home were analytical and intense. Grammatical errors were corrected with vigor, and education was seen as critically important.

In 1962 my father emigrated from Syria to the United States, fleeing the oppressive political climate of the regime. My mother is American, and it was received wisdom in our home that the United States was the best country in the world, and I was lucky to have been born here. I heard many different languages spoken

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By Leila Nadya Sadat

ANOTHER WONDERFUL DIMENSION OF TEACHING IS HOW IT ENHANCES MY SCHOLARSHIP. I love to write and typically have several research projects going at once. Every time I have to explain a difficult case or theory, I learn it better. Each time I am challenged by my students to express myself more clearly or repeat something, I become a better communicator. One of the many gifts of teaching is that students keep you young, and they keep you on your toes! They are sophisticated users of technology and help me to adapt to changing research techniques and communication media. I have been fortunate over the years to have many talented students participate either in research projects or work as Harris Institute Fellows on international research projects. They have checked citations, pulled law review articles, tabulated statistics, edited essays, created PowerPoint presentations, generated indexes, proofread documents, and even co-authored articles. I am indebted to them.

AS I WRITE THIS, SUMMER IS DRAWING TO A CLOSE AND THE STUDENTS ARE TRICKLING BACK. At the same time, much is happening in the world at large. The Chinese government has complained about the stability of the U.S. financial system, as Congress and the President quarrel about the debt ceiling; the dollar has continued to weaken vis-à-vis the Euro; and the United States continues to debate the utility of military action in Afghanistan, Iraq, and Libya. The U.S. economy and political system are experiencing significant transitional shocks as the world changes from an international system premised upon U.S. dominance to a multi-polar system with many important players. In this difficult environment, international legal education is more important than ever. In addition to helping my students understand the substantive law, I strive to show them that American lawyers have important and useful skills to bring to the table in addressing the effects of globalization, and help them to develop those skills. Critical thinking and legal reasoning, good judgment, negotiation, oral advocacy, effective writing—these are the tools of the lawyers’ trade, and they are as useful in international negotiations and dispute settlement as they are in domestic cases and transactions. I look forward to this year with great anticipation, remembering not only why I teach, but how fortunate I am to be able to do so.

Leila Nadya Sadat, the Henry H. Oberschelp Professor of Law and director of the Whitney R. Harris World Law Institute, is an internationally recognized authority on international criminal law and human rights. 

"Why I Teach" is a regular column in the Washington University Law Magazine highlighting various faculty members’ unique and heartfelt reflections on what makes teaching law rewarding. Previous columns have been written by Dean Kent Syverud and Professors Susan Appleton, David Becker, John Drobak, Michael Greenfield, and Daniel Keating. To view these columns, visit: law.wustl.edu/WhyITeach.