



Interfaithings

To **Interfaith**: To enter into respectful dialogue regarding beliefs, values, and practices with adherents of religious world views other than one's own.

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*I wake to sleep, and take my waking slow...
I learn by going where I have to go.*

Theodore Roethke,
The Waking

Welcome to the fifth issue of *Interfaithings*, a publication of the Interfaith Bridging Initiative.*

For those of us living in the northern hemisphere, our landscape is now modulating from green to brown to white. We've begun our annual journey into the sometimes serene, sometimes forbidding recesses of winter: a time when reverie and introspection are all but ordained – a time for inward journeying.

In this issue, in consonance with the season, we are pleased to offer accounts by two individuals – from two different faith paths – of pilgrimages that changed their landscapes: journeys on which they visited sacred spaces in the physical world and, at the same time, sacred spaces within themselves.

The English word, *pilgrim*, is derived from a Latin word, *peregrinus*, which means *alien* or *coming from foreign parts*. A pilgrim, then, is – at root – someone who allows herself or himself to be foreign, to be a stranger, to move out of tried and true into novel space and novel time. In the aftermath of the recent Wall

Street meltdown and the just concluded U.S. election and in recognition that the tried and true is now **trying** but no longer **true**, many of us find ourselves feeling like strangers in a strange land. Perhaps it would help, as we read of these authors' pilgrimages, to reflect on how the various departures on which we are now embarking might be inaugural of new sacred journeys ... of new pilgrimages of our own.

We also are pleased to include here brief responses to last month's *Gifts and Challenges of Controversy* conference, cosponsored by the Interfaith Bridging Initiative and the Human Rights Center of the University of Minnesota. Several of you have expressed your regrets at not being able to join us at that event. Hopefully, these remarks will provide a sense of what transpired to those who weren't there and reenergize the distillation process for those who were.

Finally, whether in green, in brown, in white, or in any other color... the bridge building continues. On pages 12 and 13, you will find a list of Twin City area interfaith conversations – conversations that will be continuing right through the winter and into the spring of 2009.

May we learn by going where we have to go.

* For the mission statement of the Interfaith Bridging Initiative, please see the next page.



Interfaithings

Interfaithings is a quarterly electronic newsletter published by IBI, the Interfaith Bridging Initiative. Please send questions, complaints, laudatory remarks, and letters to the editor to:

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Interfaithings is a publication of the Interfaith Bridging Initiative or IBI. The mission statement of IBI is: **To serve as an agent for enhanced communication, cooperation, and understanding among interfaith leaders and individuals committed to doing interfaith work in the Twin Cities metropolitan area.**

IBI was launched in the summer of 2006. In addition to publishing this newsletter/journal, the Initiative hosts conferences and maintains a website where you will find the archives of this publication and a bulletin board of upcoming interfaith events in the Twin Cities metropolitan area. Our website address is www.interfaithings.org.

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Ira Gordon



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Ira L. Gordon, Editor

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Reflections on My Spiritual Journey to Makkah

By Owais Bayunus

Hajj (pilgrimage to the House of God in Makkah) is considered the fifth pillar of Islam, meaning every Muslim man and woman who can afford it and is in good health has to perform Hajj (at least) once in his or her lifetime. My very first recollection of people going to perform Hajj was in my childhood in Karachi, where all the pilgrims from Pakistan used to assemble at the harbor to board ships heading towards Saudi Arabia. There was a distinct difference between them and the rest of the people who were not going to Hajj. The men were all dressed in white, women were well covered, and you could see children running around dressed similarly. They were more organized than other people and always remained with their group, lest they get lost and be a problem for themselves and others. When a friend of my father went to perform Hajj, my father took me along to bid him farewell at the passenger ship. In those days, the rich pilgrims normally flew to Jeddah directly and the middle class and the poorer people would take a ship to Jeddah, a journey of almost seven days. The ship was fully occupied by almost two thousand people, with a separate open place for the daily prayers. The impression of seeing these pilgrims remained on my mind for a long time, and whenever I would read any where about the pilgrimage to Makkah, I would remember those pilgrims. Several years later, while I was on an assignment to Nigeria, I once drove near Niger's

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particle of dust
and sand.

border close to Lake Chad, south of the Sahara. There I came across a caravan, which, I was told, was heading towards Makkah for pilgrimage almost 18-20 months away. There are many such caravans in the Sahara heading to Makkah on camels and on foot any time of the year. I remembered the saying, "All roads lead to Makkah," which seemed to be true. Upon leaving Nigeria, I accepted an offer to teach in a University in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia. Fortunately, it was very close to the Hajj season. So I decided to go there just in time to be able to perform my religious duty.

When my plane landed at Jeddah

Airport, I was taken in a bus to Makkah. For the first time, I was overwhelmed by my own emotions in anticipation of the holy journey and the pilgrimage I was about to perform, a journey which every able-bodied Muslim should perform – if he or she can afford it – at least once in his or her lifetime.

Passing through largely uninhabited land with distant hills, my eyes searched for every detail of the contour of the land and every rock and stone, which might have been lying there from the time of Prophet Muhammad (pbuh)¹. In my heart, I felt an unexplainable attraction for every particle of dust and sand. When the bus was entering the city, I could see the mountain on the top of which Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) had his first encounter with the Angel Gabriel, which had changed the course

of history. I recalled how he came back running to tell his wife about this experience.

The Story of Hajj

The story of Hajj begins about 3,500 years ago, when the Prophet of God, Ibrahim (pbuh), known in English as Abraham (pbuh), took his wife, Hajirah (Hagar), and their son, Ismael (Ishmael), to the valley of Baka'a near the Hills of Faran and left them there by God's command. Baka'a, now called Makkah, means a desolate place with no vegetation, and Faran (originally Paran) is the name of the hills on the western slopes of the Arabian Peninsula. Greatly concerned with the thirst of the infant and of herself, Hajirah ran desperately in search for water and made seven trips back and forth between the nearby hills of Safa and Marwah. Allah (SWT)² then caused Ismail to rub his feet against the sand and a spring of water, the water of Zamzam, came out. This spring has never stopped and water still gushes out of it, and once upon a time it was the only source of water for the City of Makkah. I have drenched myself several times in the water of Zamzam and drunk it to my content.

In his next trip back to Makkah, under God's command, Ibrahim (pbuh) then built the first monotheistic house of God, Kaabah, and then summoned people to come to the sanctuary for pilgrimage³. From that day onward throughout recorded history, every single year at the prescribed days, people from near and far have come for pilgrimage to Makkah and its vicinity in response to the call of Ibrahim (pbuh):

"Behold! We gave the site of the Sacred House to Ibrahim (saying): 'Associate

not anything {neither graven images nor human intermediaries} with Me; And sanctify My House for those who compass it round, or those who stand up (in prayers), or bow, or prostrate themselves. And proclaim the pilgrimage among men: they will come to thee on foot and (mounted) on every kind of camel, lean on account of journeys through deep and distant mountain highways.’ ” (HOLY QURAN 22:26-27)

But the tests of Ibrahim had not ended yet. Ibrahim (pbuh) then saw in dreams that he was asked to offer in sacrifice to Allah (SWT) what he loved the most. When he had ascertained that it was not just a dream but a vision and true commandment from God, he told his son about the dream: “O my son! I have seen in a dream that I am sacrificing you on God’s command, so what do you think?” They both realized that this was an order from Allah (SWT). Ismael

responded without any hesitation: “Father do what you have been commanded, You shall find me among the very patient InshaAllah.”

They both submitted to the will of Allah, the father walking ahead and the patient son following him. Ibrahim was leading his most beloved treasure, the answer to his ninety years of prayers, ready to give back the gift of his first son to the One who had given him in the first place. Satan (the Devil) approached them, and tried, through reason, to demonstrate that what they were intending to do was wrong. They threw rocks and hit him, and he ran away depressed. Ibrahim (pbuh), blindfolded, laid his son prostrate and directed a sharp knife towards his neck. At this very moment, Allah (SWT) called him: “O Ibrahim! You have made your dream come true!

Thus do We reward the good doers.” A big sheep was sent down from heaven to be slaughtered instead of Ismael, and they both had a big celebration that day. This event is celebrated every year by over a billion Muslims all over the world. It is known as Eid ul Adha, when Muslims slaughter animals and the meat is partly consumed and partly distributed to friends, relatives, and the poor.

Hajj is the call to remember the love of God displayed by Ibrahim and his family and the sacrifice they were prepared to make. Now each year, over three million Muslims the world-over respond to the call of Ibrahim and perform pilgrimage at the designated time.

Millions with Tears in Their Eyes
Looking at Kaabah for the first time is an experience hardly anyone can forget. When I looked at Kaabah, a strange sensation passed through my spine and

I stood still, gazing at it for some time. The Kaabah, which I had been seeing in pictures all my life and towards which I turned my face when praying five times a day, the House of Almighty Allah on Earth, was right in front of me. I was stunned for a while.

Was this the place which Ibrahim and Ismael had built

thousands of years ago, the center of monotheism? I had read in books that, the prayers you speak when you first see Kaabah are accepted by God. I had many prayers I wanted to ask but then, at the crucial moment, I forgot them. I just asked God to let me enter paradise upon my death and to accept all my subsequent prayers. Later I realized that these were excellent supplications to God. I went close to Kaabah, kissed its velvet curtain, and kissed the Black

Stone received by Ibrahim (pbuh) and revered by all Muslims⁴. With tears in my eyes, I circumambulated the Kaabah seven times, prayed near the mark of the footstep of Ibrahim, drank the water of Zamzam, and drenched myself in it. I ran between the hills of Safa and Marwah, remembering the passion and desperation of our mother Hajirah when she was left alone with her infant son in that desolate valley. I remembered how God watched over her.

Circumambulating Kaabah is another experience, which cannot be described in words. You feel so close to God: like a moth circling around a candle, an electron around a nucleus, or a planet around the sun. You are like a drop of water in the roaring sea of men and women that is circling the Kaaba. Like a devotee, who has given up every thing for the sake of God, you go round and round the house of the Creator in ecstasy and love.

I walked on the road on which Ibrahim (pbuh) and Ismael (pbuh) had once walked. When they had walked here, both were prepared to make the supreme sacrifice. Ibrahim (pbuh), out of his love for God, was readying himself to offer up his first son – the very son who’d been granted him in response to a life time of prayers (*Isma* meaning *listened* and *El* meaning *God*). I remembered my own daughter at that time and the love I had in my heart for her. I thought of the Great Prophet Ibrahim (pbuh), walking this same road, when his mind may have been telling him to do one thing while his heart, full of love and submission to God, another.

I prayed on the Mountain of Mercy, located on the great plain of Arafat.⁵⁺⁶ Here Adam and Eve had met for the first time after they had been sent down to earth from Heaven. Just imagine how happy they must have been seeing each other on Earth the first time. What is the probability of two

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human beings meeting on the surface of the earth within their lifetime when one, Eve, had been sent down to Jeddah (literally meaning grandmother) and the other, Adam, to Sri Lanka? I threw pebbles at the structure symbolizing Satan, in imitation of Ibrahim (pbuh) and Ismael (pbuh) casting stones at the Devil. I slaughtered a sheep, thinking again of Ibrahim (pbuh) and Ismael.

Hajj is an experience of a lifetime. The sea of men and women wrapped in the same two pieces of cloth with no marks, no distinction between rich and poor, king or beggar, white or black or brown or yellow. All equal in the eyes of God. The Earth and its politics, its wealth and its celebrities seem to be a small thing when you feel so close to God.

I saw millions of men and women, many with tears in their eyes, ready to help with compassion. People who could speak only their native languages were full of love for others whom they had never seen. I saw an old man and his wife, perhaps in their eighties, walking together slowly, hand in hand, with each other's help. You could hear people speaking Arabic, Urdu, English, French, Russian, Turkish, and Spanish; name any language of the world. And every one – in a low tone or loudly – chanting to God:

“God I am here, God I am here (to the call of Ibrahim (pbuh) which he made

three thousand years ago). There is no God but You. All praises are for You and all blessings are from You and the whole World belongs to you. There is no partner in Your divinity.”

Owais Bayunus



Owais Bayunus, originally from Pakistan, is President of the Islamic Center of Minnesota and Vice Chair of JRLC, the Joint Religious Legislative Coalition, an advocacy group of Muslims, Christians and Jews who consult with the Minnesota legislature around issues of religious and social justice concern. Previously, he was also a long time Chairman of the Muslim Christian Dialog Group, a joint venture of the Minnesota Council of Churches and the Islamic Center.

Mr. Bayunus has enjoyed an intensive religious as well as modern education from an early age. He was awarded a CENTO Merit Scholarship to Middle East Technical University in Ankara (Turkey), where he received BS and MS degrees in Chemical Engineering. Then he moved to the USA where he earned a second Masters degree in Industrial Management from Cornell University and later was awarded a Fellowship at the University of Michigan (Ann Arbor). Professionally, he was Area Manager of a British company for northern Nigeria, taught in a University in Jeddah, and has worked in oil companies in the Middle East and USA for over 25 years.

Mr. Bayunus has traveled extensively in the Middle East, Far East, Europe, Africa and North America. While in Pakistan and Saudi Arabia, he enriched himself with Islamic studies under well known scholars, specializing in Islamic history and jurisprudence.

For the past two decades, Mr. Bayunus has been a frequent speaker on interfaith matters and pluralism, Islam and current affairs, and women's rights. Currently, he also teaches courses in Adult Muslim Education to new Muslims and those interested in Islam and is consulted by the Islamic Center and other mosques as a resource on Islam and Islamic law. He also serves as an Imam, conducting Muslim marriages registered in the state of Minnesota and offering counseling on Islamic marital issues.

In addition to English, Mr. Bayunus speaks Urdu, Persian and Turkish and has a working knowledge of Arabic.

He can be reached at oyunus@aol.com.

Footnotes:

[1] Pbh – “Peace Be Upon Him.” Muslims say “peace be upon him” after the name of every prophet of God.

[2] SWT – (Arabic) “Subhanallah Wa Taala,” meaning “Glory be to God.”

[3] Kaabah – Also spelled Kaaba. It is a near cubicle structure made by Ibrahim (pbuh) and Ismael (pbuh) and has been renovated several times on the original foundation. The city of Makkah is spread all around it. Being the first monotheistic place of worship, Muslims, wherever they are on the surface of earth, turn their faces towards Kaabah when performing daily prayers.

[4] The Black Stone is believed to be a piece of meteorite, which came from Paradise. It was a sign for Abraham (pbuh) as the location for the place where to build the Kaaba (House of God). Although highly revered by Muslims, no divine connection or supernatural power is attached to it. The Black Stone is now paved in the eastern corner of the Kaaba so that pilgrims can kiss it in reverence.

[5] Mount of Mercy – A hill at one corner of Arafat. It is believed that Adam and Eve met on this hill for the first time when they were sent down to Earth. Muslims also revere it because Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) had delivered a very important sermon during his farewell pilgrimage from this hill.

[6] Arafat – It is a very large plane where pilgrims pray in the afternoon as a necessary part of the Hajj.

The Pilgrim Path

By Mary Kaye Medinger

*Stand beside the earliest roads,
Ask the pathways of old which is the way to
good, and walk it;
Thus you will find rest for your souls.*

Jeremiah 6:16,
Translated by Michael Rodgers

The spiritual practice of going on pilgrimage is found in many religious traditions. In my own tradition of Catholic Christianity, pilgrimages often take us to sites associated with the life of Jesus or one of the saints. Sometimes we go on pilgrimage to places nearby. And in the process, if we are open to the Spirit, we may find ourselves deep into our own souls as well.

It often turns out that the journeys to and from the place are at least as important as the destination itself. And as we journey outward, we journey inward at the same time. The wise pilgrim travels lightly – this is a significant challenge for North Americans in particular who sometimes question how they can manage with less rather than more! Even one backpack or small rolling suitcase is more than many of our ancestors carried and can tend to weigh us down.

We walk the pilgrim path with others across the ages who have preceded us, members all of the great “communion of saints.” And sometimes, along the way, we encounter “angels of direction” – people who show up just at the right moment, help us get our bearings, and then seem to vanish.

This is a fairly common experience. In May of 2001, at the age of 55, I set out alone on a pilgrimage to Western Europe in search of sites associated with holy women in my life. My journey took me to Bingen in west central Germany where I had made arrangements to spend a couple of days at a monastery founded by the Rhineland mystic, musician, healer, writer and abbess, Hildegard of Bingen (1098-1179). Traveling by train from Amsterdam via Cologne, able to speak very little German, I had found my way to Rudesheim and the parish church where the relics (bones) of Hildegard rest. (Catholics believe that divinity is revealed in and through created reality and are often drawn to physical manifestations of the Holy.) Alone in the church, I truly did sense her presence. And I so appreciated the tasteful way in which the ancient church had been renovated following the liturgical reforms of the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965).

As I came out of the church, I could see the abbey in the distance beyond the vineyard-covered hills. But I had no idea how to get there. The large parish cemetery was spread out in front of me, each grave like a little garden, tended by family members who each week weeded

and watered and replaced 8-day votive lights in glass containers. And beyond the cemetery I could see no roads that led up the hill. There was no one to ask. Suddenly, it seemed, a small, elderly

woman was standing next to me and saw my puzzled expression. She spoke no English and I, with my few words of German, tried to explain what I needed. She took my hand and led me through the cemetery, through the gate in the stone wall at the back and down a little lane that eventually intersected with a larger road that clearly led up the hill.

I thanked her as best I could and started up the road. Much to my surprise, she indicated that she would walk with me the entire way – and, further, indicated that if we hurried, we could make it there in time for Evening Prayer with the nuns in the abbey church. I learned that her name was Paula, she was a mother and grandmother, she was in her eighties – and, she was a fast walker! I could barely keep up with her! Pulling my suitcase, I followed her up a rough path through the vineyard that would save us a little time. With a look of satisfaction, she led me into the church just as the bell in the bell tower rang to announce prayer. We prayed together there and then she introduced me to the Sister in charge of guests and said goodbye. We hugged each other, and I knew I would never see her again – and knew that she was the angel who had led me to this place that I had so longed to see.

Preparations for a pilgrimage mean preparing both inwardly and outwardly. In addition to making sure that one’s passport and shots are up to date, it is always wise to focus on our inner intent. To be a pilgrim is not the same as being a tourist. In preparation for that same pilgrimage, where I also hoped to visit the villages in Germany near Trier where my maternal great-grandparents were born, my mother and I paid a visit to

And sometimes,
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their graves in St. Paul. I had come to the cemetery office the week before to get a map and directions. I had never been there before; my mother had not been there for over sixty years. I had brought along the only things I had that had belonged to them – their rosaries. We held their rosaries, and I prayed that Katherine and Michael would be with me on this journey...

The return, too, is a very important part of a pilgrimage, and we rarely give it its due – eager to get back to our work and “normalcy”. But we rush through the return at our peril, as I learned later that spring. And so it was to that same cemetery that I returned, some weeks later, to end my pilgrimage. And in my journal, I wrote to those long-dead great-grandparents, my own saints, who had accompanied me on my journey:

*Sunday, May 27, 2001
Feast of the Ascension
Calvary Cemetery, St. Paul*

Dear Katherine and Michael, beloved great-grandparents,

The bells from the old German Catholic church down the hill are ringing as I sit here by your graves on this Sunday morning of Memorial Day weekend, five weeks after my first visit. And in between, I have been to other worlds – the world of Amsterdam and Deventer in Holland and of the Dutch Jewish writer Etty Hillesum, my dear soul friend murdered at Auschwitz; the world of Bingen, Eibingen, Disibodenberg and of beloved Hildegard in Germany; the world of Chartres in France and of the one who is honored there - my namesake, Mary the mother of Jesus and sister to us all. And at the heart, the center of the whole journey that was this pilgrimage, dear ones – was my day in the villages in the hills of Germany where you two were born.

On a rainy Sunday afternoon in late April, Mom and I brought flowers from my garden and cleaned your gravestones. I prayed that you would be with me on my journey and you were. And I have no doubt that you were with me this morning too, leading me here back to the place where

my journey began. I sit here now on my little lawn chair under a lovely maple tree just budding, and realize that I have never visited graves on or near Memorial Day. My cynical self says that most Americans use these days to leave town for three days or shop at “Memorial Day sales”. So it is a lovely surprise to see so many people here this morning, children bringing flowers, women with rags and pails for cleaning the stones, men with clippers to trim the grass. They too are on pilgrimage...

My journey back from my pilgrimage is going to take a long while. The image that came to me yesterday was of a deep-sea diver and the care that must be taken not to rise to the surface too quickly – that could be very dangerous and even fatal. I have been to a very deep place, long ago and far away – my visit to the ancestors. I need to take great care not to rise to the surface too quickly... Now that I have visited the places where you were born, so long ago and far away, I return to your graves with more flowers – purple and yellow iris, blue bachelor buttons and feathery green “Our Lady’s Bedstraw”. And I bring water for you too – from the clear, cold spring that flows from the fountain just behind the old house that was Michael’s family home in Holzerath – the village he left when he was twelve. And Katherine – you left Schonendorf when you were only eight. Did you remember the sound of the rushing Ruwer River and the sight and smell of the surrounding forest coming to life in the spring? I will sprinkle the water now – on the grass over your graves and on the flowers from my garden. And I will rise from the water... slowly...

Bless my homecoming, dear ones... with love from your great-granddaughter,

Mary Kathryn.

*Where we had thought to travel outward,
we will come to the center of our own
existence.*

*And where we had thought to be alone,
we will be with all the world.*

Joseph Campbell

Mary Kaye Medinger



Mary Kaye Medinger served as founding director of Wisdom Ways Center for Spirituality, a ministry of the Sisters of St. Joseph of Carondelet (CSJ) in St. Paul, from 1995 until 2008. A teacher, writer and retreat leader, she currently serves on the CSJ Membership Team. Mary Kaye holds degrees in History and Education and a certificate in Holistic Health Studies, all from the College of St. Catherine, as well as a Master of Arts in Pastoral Studies from the University of St. Thomas. In 2007, she completed training as a spiritual director.

Most of Mary Kaye’s post-graduate study has been in the area of spirituality, including classroom study and ecumenical pilgrimages to El Salvador and Nicaragua (Base Christian Communities, 1989), Eastern Europe (the Holocaust, and Women in the Churches, 1993), Ireland (Celtic Spirituality, 1994), Wales (Celtic Spirituality, 2000), and Western Europe (In Search of Holy Women: Etty Hillesum, Hildegard of Bingen and Mary at Chartres, 2001). In addition, she has co-led a Women’s Spiritual Quest to Eastern Europe (2004), a Women’s Spiritual Quest to the highlands of central Mexico (2006) and a one week contemplative pilgrimage to Chartres Cathedral in France, focusing on Wisdom for Our World: The Mysteries of Mary (2008).

Mary Kaye’s lifelong interest in Mary of Nazareth, the Mother of Jesus, has been a particular area of study since 1981, and she has been giving talks, teaching classes, leading workshops and retreats on this topic with thousands of people since 1986. Other areas of interest and study include Celtic spirituality and the life and writings of Etty Hillesum, a Dutch Jewish writer who was murdered at Auschwitz in 1943.

Mary Kaye is the mother of two adult children and became a grandmother in 2002. She lives in St. Paul, Minnesota, the city of her birth. She can be reached at mkmedinger@csjstpaul.org

Responses to the Gifts and Challenges of Controversy Conference

Editor's Introduction

On October 19, 2008, the Interfaith Bridging Initiative and the Human Rights Center of the University of Minnesota hosted a one day conference, the title of which was *The Gifts and Challenges of Controversy: Tools for Deep Connection*. For the third consecutive year, the IBI autumn event took place at the Law School of the U. of M. Here we offer three responses to that experience.

The Editor

Reflections on the IBI Conference, *The Gifts and Challenges of Controversy: Tools for Deep Connection*

As the conference concluded – in enthusiastic song and whacking of tambourines – those of us assembled committed to “study war no more.” It had been a memorable day of new ideas, new practices, deep discussions, and celebration of the ancient arts of painting, song, dance and hospitality.

The challenge was put before us by our keynote speaker – Dr. Kenneth Fox, Director of Conflict Studies Programs at Hamline University. What if, he asked us, our notions of problem solving are based on a false premise: that at heart, we are all the same? What if the common ground we seek does not exist? Dr. Fox went on to describe emerging, postmodern ideas about conflict resolution: for example, a concept called Transcendent Discourse has the potential of showing us that while harmony may not be a viable outcome, real choices exist, and improved relationships with the “other” are possible.

After his thought-provoking keynote, each conference participant chose two of the seven sessions that illustrated and put into practice the concepts Dr. Fox presented to us. We, Pen and Charlie, chose Margarita Mac's *Embodied Compassion: Connecting across Differences with Nonviolent Communication* as our first session. For our second sessions, Pen chose Joan Haan's *The Inner and Outer Work of Engaging with Conflict Nonviolently*, and Charlie chose Arvind Auluck-Wilson's *Looking for Unity: a Baha'i Conflict Resolution Toolkit* (Baha'i). Each of the sessions both supported and pushed back on Dr. Fox's thoughts, providing rich dialogue and deepening understanding of the complexities with which conflict presents us.

Here is a sample of observations from the three sessions we attended:

Margarita showed us that while common ground may not exist between parties in conflict, a common human characteristic of compassion does. Practicing compassion

in both language and thought allows one to see “the other” as equally human as oneself – a key to building a relationship that will allow conflict to be resolved.

Through participative exercises, Joan demonstrated the importance of being heard in conflict situations, reinforcing Fox's concept that relationship may be more important than agreement.

Arvind shared key writings from the Baha'i faith, which allowed us to see that there are many layers to finding unity, each one requiring time and effort and looking beyond ourselves to an ever-broadening viewpoint. This supports the point made by Professor Fox that Transcendent Discourse permits us to see choices that will improve the conditions among parties in conflict.

As we drove home after the singing had quieted, we reflected on the ideas, energy, creativity, and diversity of these useful tools and practices discovered in the course of a single day. Though conflict is everywhere present, so are the ways to handle it. As a result, we can look forward with hope and confidence.

**Respectfully submitted,
Charlie & Pen Curry**

Reflecting on Gifts

At *The Gifts and Challenges of Controversy* conference I recently attended, I received three unexpected gifts. As a member of the Interfaith Bridging Initiative that co-sponsored the conference, I was well versed in the program content regarding tools for conflict resolution. What I was not prepared for or overlooked were the wonderful gifts of music and dance, visual art and listening to the stories of others.

Music and Dance

Many times conferences rely on only one type of learning — namely, presentations and dialogue. There are, however, other valuable ways to expand our horizons. Music and interpretive

dance are also forms of transformational learning. They invoke a primordial response that goes beyond the mind and invokes the spirit. On October 19th, the arts coexisted with exposition. Singers, Chris Kliesen Wehrman and David Nyberg, and drummer, Umar Williams, performed the songs *Anthem* by Leonard Cohen and *Serve Somebody* by Bob Dylan and led all of us in a spirited rendition of *Down By the Riverside*. The age diverse company, Kairos Dance Theatre, danced *The Breath Dance* to the music of *Ladysmith Black Mombasa*. Dancers Joan Haan, Ira Gordon, and Virginia Roivanen presented interpretive dance to the music: *The Black Saint and the Sinner Lady* by Charles Mingus. Both the music and the dance reinforced messages regarding dispute resolution that had been presented in the conference breakout sessions. Another aspect of the experience that impacted me personally was the range of ages on stage in the Kairos performance and the demonstration that an elderly person sitting in a chair can dance as surely as someone who is able to stand and move about freely.

Visual Art

The conference also hosted an art show that included the work of Twin Cities artists and the work of artists living in Najaf and other parts of Iraq. The art of the ten Iraqi artists was made available to the conference thanks to the generosity of Ms. Kathy McKay. These beautiful and at times haunting renditions from Iraq added a level of connection to this troubled country and provided another voice of the need for building bridges between people and countries.

Listening to the Stories of Others

As we all know, hearing and listening are two separate actions. The Sufis, the mystical devotees of Islam, say that, to truly listen to someone, we must use our hearts rather than our ears. We have to silence our own inner chatter in order to hear what someone else is saying. How many times do I find myself listening with only “half an ear” much less with my heart?

Listening deeply requires us to be fully present; it is not a passive act. Far from it, it will most likely take our full resolve to truly listen and to be present for only a few minutes. At this conference, I was reminded of how great a gift we give and receive when we truly listen to others. In breakout sessions, I found myself reflecting on the admonition of Henri Nouwen, “Every moment of conversation provides us the opportunity to decide whether the greater good will be served by our words or by our silence.”

Paul Strickland

Intimations

At the recent *Gifts and Challenges of Controversy* Conference, I had the pleasure of watching the dance, “*Intimations*,” choreographed and performed by Joan Haan, Virginia

Rovainen, and Ira Gordon. I found the performance refreshingly evocative and a useful meditation in the context of the conference. The theme of the dance was obviously conflict—the dance was built of sequences filled with tension and ambiguity, as each of the three dancers seemed to wrestle with one another in search of an elusive equilibrium for her/himself and for themselves collectively. Yet, at the same time, the dancers’ movements were so appealingly graceful that they provided a place for the viewer to stand, amid the ongoing scene of conflict. A particularly powerful example of this was the juxtaposition of certain loud and chaotic segments of the music* with decidedly slow and rhythmic movement by the dancers. The effect was a pronounced stateliness that gave the audience a sense of repose amid turbulence. Altogether, I found the dance a poignant and beautiful representation—perhaps even a model—of staying present with conflict.

David Lieberman

Footnote:

* *The Black Lady and the Sinner Lady*. Composer: Charles Mingus.

COMMUNICATE

Letter(s) to the Editor

Your letters to us are appreciated. There is always a temptation for an author to suspect that she or he is talking to her/himself. We don't promise to always print what you send us. But we do promise to read what you send us carefully and, where appropriate, to pass it on to one or more of our authors. *Interfaithings* is for all of us on the editorial staff a conversation, not a series of monologues. Please send your questions and comments to: *Interfaithings* Editor: takunow@live.com.

The following letter is in response to the essay, "Both/And," written by yours truly, which appeared in the June, 2008 issue of PARTILE.

Ira L. Gordon

Dear Mr. Gordon,

I read your essay, "Both/And?" in the recent *Interfaithings* with great interest. I sensed your struggle to delineate a perspective that pushes beyond the way that many of us think about interfaith dialogue. This seems like vital work, and I find the attempt to incorporate Buber's philosophy of I-Thou and I-It relationships particularly intriguing.

While I felt the impact of what you wrote, there were some points of confusion I had in my reading. I would request some clarification, but before introducing my questions I first need to summarize a few points in the first half of your essay. In your essay, you preface your own approach by referencing three other ways of attempting dialogue: "you're wrong," "you're wrong but I can understand the reason for it," and "we see each other in a space of acceptance in which controversy is momentarily held in abeyance." Then you discuss your own suggested approach, an attempted blend of Buber's I-Thou and I-It modes. Here are my questions:

Is the "space of acceptance" approach different than Buber's I-Thou? If so, what would Buber's I-Thou mode look like translated into interfaith work?

I further assume that the I-Thou mode is not sufficient for what you are getting at, since you are suggesting incorporating the I-It mode also. Would you explain what an I-Thou/I-It approach would look like as different from a purely I-Thou approach?

At the end of the essay you come back to Tevye and his paradoxical stance. I'm not exactly clear how his stance relates to interfaith work. Would you elaborate?

Finally, I don't see how Tevye's paradox reflects your I-Thou/I-It paradox (as I'm surmising the latter). Would you explain?

If you would provide examples or 'thought pictures' in answer to my questions—as you did for the prefatory views—I think that would be very helpful. Thank you.

Sincerely,
DL

Mr. Gordon responds...

First, I'd like to thank David Lieberman for his thoughtful questions. It is an honor to be presented with sensitive questions that reflect a careful reading of what one has written. And if those questions expose places where I've been unclear or unsure of my ground, so much the better.

Mr. Lieberman has correctly identified options I single out as constituting four ways of responding when we find ourselves in disagreement. As for the "space of acceptance" response, here is how I put it in my essay: "... there is another way to silence the voice of 'You're wrong.' When I've enjoyed soul-to-soul communion, that's been quite easy to do – for a while. If I truly **see** you and you truly **see** me, the differences in our world view are unlikely to sever the bond that brings us together." I do not offer "soul to soul communion" and "being seen by one another" as alternatives to what Buber is talking about but rather as ways to enter into the meaning of his *I-THOU*.

Where I become uncomfortable with Buber's analysis is when he delineates *I-THOU* as the locus of the sacred while *I-IT* becomes the not-sacred, the profane: "This, however, is the sublime melancholy of our lot that every *YOU* must become an *IT* in our world....Every *YOU* in the world is doomed by its nature to become a thing or at least to enter into thinghood again and again."*

When two individuals enter into a dispute and bring to that dispute their biases and their particular ways of parsing the world, they are not meeting on the sacred ground of *I-THOU*. In the heat of argument, they may see each other poorly if at

all. And yet from such disputes, wonderful new understandings sometimes emerge. When Rabbis Hillel and Shammai two of the great early expositors of Torah quarreled as they did time and time again, the sparks they generated illuminated the landscape of mosaic wisdom not only for themselves and their contemporaries but for posterity as well.

To be sure, it helped that Hillel and Shammai shared a profound commitment to the task of explicating Torah. But with or without a shared theology, the clash of ideas can be transformative and exalting. One recent example is the high voltage dispute between Albert Einstein and Niels Bohr over the role of unpredictability and randomness in science – a dispute that is still unresolved and that continues to germinate creative thinking among theoretical physicists. Einstein and Bohr held each other in high regard, but the lenses through which they viewed the physical universe were very different.

Another example of a felicitous non *I-THOU* exchange is the at times acrimonious dispute that broke out after World War II between Carl Jung and his exact contemporary, Martin Buber. These two thinkers, both of whom have had an enormous impact on 20th and 21st century attempts to understand where we are and where we're going, quarreled vigorously and intriguingly on the appropriate ways to think about and talk about God.** All three of these examples – different though they are from one another – point to something quite important: **quarreling over seminal ideas can be a conduit to the sacred no less than *I-THOU* encounter.**

And so... what about Mr. Lieberman's last two questions? What about Tevye? [In my essay, "Both/And," I cite the example of the character Tevye in *Fiddler on the Roof* who, in a heated conversation in the market square, avers that two of his neighbors espousing diametrically opposite views are both right.] If we are to be successful in building interfaith bridges that span our vales of mistrust and misunderstanding, we are certainly going to need a measure of humility and an appreciation of how all our truths are, at best, approximations. In other words, we need Tevye's *Both/And*.

But if interfaith work is to move past kindergarten level nicety into the sacred space where real transformation can occur, we are also going to need a measure of hutzpah, of audacity – the audacity to say "this is right" and "this is wrong." On what then does the success or failure of our interfaith ventures depend? Perhaps on this: that we acquire the knack of knowing

when to stand in the sacred space of *Both/And*, when to stand in the sacred space of *Either/Or*, and when to enter into shuttle diplomacy between the two.

Footnotes:

* Martin Buber, *I and Thou*, translator: Walter Kaufman. New York; Simon & Schuster, 1970, pgs. 68,69.

** Buber's critique of Jung is set forth in *Eclipse of God*, New York, Harper & Brothers, pgs. 104-122. Jung's reply – "An Answer to Martin Buber" – is reprinted in *The Collected Works of Carl Jung*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, Volume 11, 1971.

BULLETIN BOARD

Special Events

16th Annual Holy Days and Holidays of Thanksgiving Around the World

At Mall of America, An Interfaith Exhibition For All Ages

December 11-12-13 (Thursday-Saturday) 2008

9:30 a.m. - 9:30 p.m.

3rd floor, Northside, Food Court Area

Near the New Golf Course

For further info: 952-831-0447 or 952-220-9852

One World Many Faiths In Hospitality, Celebration, Discovery, Learning

Presented by the Mall Area Religious Council (MARC)

Welcome to this Annual Display where Conversation takes place with folks of many world religions, races, and creeds.

An Interfaith Dialogue

Across the Divides: Interfaith Work ... Its Gifts and Challenges

With Anantanand Rambachan and Ira L. Gordon

January 28, 2009 – 7:00 to 9:00 PM

Wayzata Community Church

125 Wayzata Boulevard East

Wayzata, MN. 55391

Complimentary Admission

**This event is part of a series entitled,
"Where Is Your Spiritual Compass?"**

FFI please call: (952) 473-8877

Dr. Anantanand Rambachan, a Hindu, and Ira L. Gordon, a Reconstructionist Jew, have for many years been deeply committed to fostering interfaith understanding. In this conversation -- first with one another and then with audience members -- they will reflect on why they do interfaith work, on the relationship between interfaith work and intrafaith

work, and on the ways in which interfaith bridge building can deepen the connection to our chosen faith paths and to ourselves.

Ongoing Activities

Sacred Texts and Interfaith Relationships: How Words & Texts Divide and/or Connect Us

A series of two hour interfaith dialogue sessions hosted by the St. Paul Interfaith Network. Free and open to the public.

The second Thursday of most months;

12:00 - 2:00 p.m.

The St. Paul Area of Churches

1671 Summit Avenue, St. Paul, MN 55105

Convener: Rev. John Marboe, pastor, Immanuel Lutheran Church, St. Paul

Beverages/cookies supplied. Brown bag lunches welcome.

Donations invited. FFI or to receive monthly e-mail notices, contact Tom Duke: tduke03@earthlink.net or (651) 263-7031

Next session: December 11, 2008

Islam and Sacred Texts with Dr. Hamdi El-Sawaf, psychotherapist, imam, consultant, and professor. Former executive director, The Islamic Center of Minnesota.

Topics to include: Different ways in which Muslims interpret their sacred texts, Prosletizing, Sharia Law.

The Parliament of the World's Religions Twin City Chapter

The fourth Tuesday of most months.

The Twin Cities Chapter of the Parliament of the World's Religions has been holding monthly meetings since September of 1989. We meet on the fourth Tuesday of most months. Because of the Christmas holiday, our December meeting will take place on Dec.

16. At that time we will be screening and discussing a Diana Eck video on interfaith work.

Special Time, December 16, 7:00 – 9:15 p.m.

The Minneapolis Spiritual Assembly of Bahai's Center
3644 Chicago Ave. South
Minneapolis, MN. 55407
FFI: Call (612) 804-4871 or (612) 861-6040.

Islamic Christian Dialogue

Hosted by the Islamic Center of Minnesota and the
Minnesota Council of Churches.

Third Sundays, 2:00 - 4:00 p.m.

The Islamic Center of Minnesota
1401 Gardena Ave. NE, Fridley

Call Gail at 612-230-3210

www.mnchurches.org

No admission fee.

Interfaith Conversations with Others Café

Interfaith dialogue. Topics/questions of faith change at
every conversation.

Third Wednesdays, 6:30 – 8:30 p.m.

The Saint Paul Council of Churches
1671 Summit Avenue. Saint Paul, Minnesota 55105
651-646-8805

Registration requested: joan@pleromacoaching.com -
\$5.00 Donation Please

For more information contact Joan at 651-641-0946.

The conversation café model is described at the
following web site:

www.conversationcafe.org.