

2014

Building an Interfaith Bridge

Rabbi Belle Michael

Follow this and additional works at: <http://digitalcommons.augustana.edu/intersections>



Part of the [Higher Education Commons](#), and the [Religion Commons](#)

Augustana Digital Commons Citation

Michael, Rabbi Belle (2014) "Building an Interfaith Bridge," *Intersections*: Vol. 2014: No. 40, Article 8.

Available at: <http://digitalcommons.augustana.edu/intersections/vol2014/iss40/8>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by Augustana Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Intersections by an authorized administrator of Augustana Digital Commons. For more information, please contact digitalcommons@augustana.edu.

Building an Interfaith Bridge

Shalom.

What has struck me most at this Interfaith Understanding conference is the sincere and honest conversations I am witnessing, including the openness to say that we need to work towards interfaith dialogue. We need to see differences as values, something to celebrate, reflect upon, and learn from. I have also learned from Diana Eck that the definition of pluralism is not just tolerance, “hospitality,” or even inclusion, but an *active seeking of understanding* across lines of differences. I want to use Eboo Patel’s inspiring metaphor of “the bridge” from “here” to “there” to unfold my reflections.

Starting from the “here”: Tonight, in my Jewish tradition, is the holiday of Shavuot, a biblical holiday mentioned in Leviticus and Deuteronomy. Together with Sukkoth and Passover, it is one of the three pilgrimage major holidays. The Holiday of Shavuot represents to us the renewal of the covenant between God and the Jewish people.

Interestingly enough, on this holiday that seems “exclusive” we read the Book of Ruth from the Torah. Ruth was a Moabite woman who followed her mother-in-law to the Israelite community. The story of Ruth is about successful interfaith relationships, about respect, care for each other, and love. It is a good example of the biblical teaching, “love your neighbor as yourself” (Leviticus 19). In one way or another, we can all relate to this story and respond to the teaching to love our neighbors.

The “catch” is that in order to love, one first needs to get to know the neighbor. This understanding brings me

to building “the bridge,” which might be composed of three building blocks: experiences, relationships, and holy curiosity.

Experiences: The former First Lady, Eleanor Roosevelt, wrote a memoir called *You Learn by Living*. Indeed, we learn by being fully engaged with life’s gifts and hurdles. We learn mostly through experiences and encounters with one another. My first encounter with Christianity was with Kathy and Rod Leard of Agoura Hills, California. My encounter with Lutheranism was with Pastors Melissa and Scott Maxwell Doherty from California Lutheran University. Through them—living by their values, modeling by behavior—I have learned about Christianity more than from any book. We in Lutheran colleges and universities need to provide our students with these opportunities for encounters and experiences with different ethnic and religious groups.

Relationships: We must cultivate genuine and long-lasting relationships. We must get to know “the other” as a person: as Belle, Joan, Michel. As mom, dad, friend, painter, hockey fan, computer geek and so on. Find out about another’s personal life and you’ll find something that connects you to that person. The rabbis taught us that relationships with each other come before the relationship with God. The Jewish philosopher Martin Buber explained that only through an I-Thou encounter with another person can one encounter the great Thou.



Rabbi Belle Michael is Campus Rabbi and Hillel Executive Director at California Lutheran University, Thousand Oaks, California. She gave a version of these remarks while leading a “Dwelling in a Tradition” session at the Interfaith Understanding Conference.

Holy Curiosity: Sincere intellectual interest in someone who is different is the key to starting a dialogue. Unfortunately, I found that many are often *afraid to ask*. The fear of not being politically correct, or worse, of offending without knowing prevents them from asking. They would rather

ignore and be ignorant than engage in a conversation that might lead to controversy. But if we want to build this bridge, we must be brave and make the first step. We must overcome this cultural barrier. By asking, we learn—and relationships begin.

Forgiveness as a Strategy for Peace

A presentation by Rev. Dean J. Seal, MATA, MDiv (Augsburg College) from the 2014 Nobel Peace Prize Forum, Minneapolis Convention Center, where His Holiness The Dalai Lama was the Keynote Speaker.



This 45 minute presentation of multi-faith conversation is available for any interfaith/world-religion setting. It utilizes narrative theology from speakers who are Catholic, Muslim, Jewish, and Reformed, whose stories are posted on YouTube from the Forgiveness 360 Symposium at Concordia University, St. Paul.

Personal. Spiritual. International.

Sample this at F-360/Amineh Safi on YouTube
Produced by Spirit in the House: spiritinthehouse.org
Contact seal13dean@gmail.com for more information.