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AMY ZALK LARSON and SHEILA RADFORD-HILL

# Journey Conversations

The Journey Conversations Project was founded by Dr. Diane Millis, an educator, consultant, and author of *Conversation-The Sacred Art: Practicing Presence in an Age of Distraction* (SkyLight Paths, 2013). The project, first launched in partnership with Luther College, provides resources and training for campuses, congregations, and community groups. At Luther, Journey Conversations is led by a team from College Ministries and the Luther Diversity Center. In partnership with other faculty and staff, the project is a major part of our interfaith work.

Each conversation moves through four phases: quiet, listen, speak, and respond. In this essay we offer some of our thinking about why we chose a contemplative conversation approach to interfaith dialogue. We also show how these four movements can deepen interfaith engagement. Finally, we provide examples of the importance of this work through the stories of two of our students.

*Quiet:* We begin a journey conversation by entering into silence through a centering practice. In an age marked by anxiety, relativism, polarization, and extremism, we find that it is important to quiet ourselves before beginning interfaith dialogue. We sit together in silence because this practice is part of many faith traditions and, as such, it can be shared by a diverse group.

*Listen:* Our time in shared silence prepares us to listen for the sacred within ourselves and with others. We practice *lectio divina* or reading aloud from wisdom literature (scripture, poetry, prose, hymns) from the great

spiritual traditions and contemporary sources. We encourage one another through wisdom literature with what St. Benedict described as “the ears of the heart.”

*Speak:* Each journey conversation involves one or more participants sharing their stories of faith and their spiritual journeys. We share our stories using the first person method of theological discourse—speaking only for ourselves and not on behalf of our faith traditions. This practice helps us to articulate our particular, lived truths.

*Respond:* After each journey story, other participants respond to the storyteller with questions that help the speaker to reflect more deeply on what she or he has shared. These “contemplative questions” encourage the speaker to continue to explore her or his journey. This practice offers participants a way to be present to others and accompany them on their journey without seeking to correct, advise, change, or proselytize them.

These four movements—quiet, listen, speak and respond—now serve as intentions for all our interfaith work. We quiet ourselves enough to truly listen to others, even those we consider extremist, irrelevant, or uninformed. We speak from a place of deeper awareness after



**Amy Zalk Larson** (pictured back middle) is a Campus Pastor at Luther College, Decorah, Iowa. **Sheila Radford-Hill** (front left) is Executive Director of the Luther Diversity Center. Both are founding partners of the Journey Conversations Project ([journeyconversations.org](http://journeyconversations.org)). Luther College students Sukeji Mikaya (front right), Habibullah Rezai (back right), and Gifty Arthur (back left) are quoted in this essay.

listening within and to others. We focus on responding to the needs of others rather than simply reacting.

“The Journey Conversations process unleashes the power of real conversation. It is harder to hate someone whose story you’ve heard first hand.”

The leaders of Journey Conversations began the project in 2009 as another way to live our Lutheran identity through interfaith work. Our task, as we see it, is to be true to our own faith while being open and welcoming to all faiths or to people with no faith at all. As Lutherans, creating this welcoming presence is a way of *building peace through inclusion*. We’ve discovered that being welcoming to others from different faith traditions involves listening attentively to how people’s faith experiences shape their

spiritual identities in everyday life. Our understanding of how our faith traditions intersect with politics, religion, spirituality, and nation-building leads us toward the kind of interfaith dialogue that encompasses the most emphatic forms of sharing.

In Journey Conversations, the stories participants tell and the responses they receive from others of different ages, backgrounds, and life journeys bring a profound sense of hope in the prospects for peace. The Journey Conversations process unleashes the power of real conversation. It is harder to hate someone whose story you’ve heard first hand; and it’s even harder to dismiss or denigrate someone when you’ve told them your story. We see the fruits of this approach in the lives of our students. They report a greater capacity to reflect on their own lives and a greater sense of empathy towards others. As examples of the kinds of stories offered in a Journey Conversations group, we asked two of our international students to reflect on their faith journeys.

**My name is Sukeji Mikaya** (International Studies and Management student, class of 2017), and I come from the present day South Sudan. My country was separated from Sudan three years ago due to various reasons, including ethnic and religious conflicts. The northern part of Sudan was predominantly Muslim and the Southern region was predominantly Christian. My family was among the four million Sudanese who were displaced. My family is Christian and we chose to reside in Uganda. The small town we settled in was predominantly Muslim and I observed how my neighbors and friends practiced Islam.

During this time, I learned an important lesson about religion from my grandfather who returned from Lebanon after receiving his degree in theology. He surprised us by reading both the Bible and the Qur’an. One evening, my cousins and I were laughing about how Muslims pray when my grandfather shouted at us and asked us to stop. He was very angry at our lack of respect for others’ religious beliefs. He made us understand that we may find Islam to be different but we should remember that our Muslim neighbors could be viewing Christianity in the same way. His words and actions made the difference for me because he was a devoted Christian pastor who also read the Qur’an. Later, I took an Islamic religion class that fostered my interest in the religion. I even admired how my Muslim friends treated the Qur’an with so much respect. This knowledge did not change my beliefs as a Christian, except that it made me want to know the Bible the way my Muslim friends knew the Qur’an. My interactions with Muslims enhanced my understanding of Islam and I stopped associating the religion with all the negative things I heard.

Today, most of my friends back at home are Muslims but religion has never stood in the way of our friendship. For us to live together in peace and harmony, it is important for us to be aware of each other, listen keenly to those we are engaging with, and learn to respond rather than to react to things that we are not in agreement with. It all begins with taking the first step to create that environment of respect like my grandfather created for me.

**I am Habibullah Rezai** (Management, Economics, and French student, class of 2015) from Afghanistan. I would like to talk about my religious background. I am a Shia Ismaili Muslim which is a sub-sect of Islam. We are the minority of minorities in the Muslim world. There are between fifteen to twenty million Ismailis around the world. I also belong to a minority ethnic group known as Hazaras. Most of the Hazaras are Shia Muslims or the Twelver Shia and we, the Ismailis, are the minorities. When civil war broke out after the defeat of the Soviet Union, ethnic cleansing started in 1989. Diversity became a source of weakness because hatred grew among people from different religious backgrounds. The manipulation of religion was used as a tool to gain political power. For me personally, it meant hiding my religious identity when moving from one place to another. For example, when I had to pass through a Sunni community, I had to introduce myself as a Sunni and when passing through a Shia community, I had to introduce myself as Shia or Twelver Shia and not as a Shia Ismaili Muslim.

What was more difficult for us (the Shias) was the rise of Taliban in 1996. While trying to take control over northern and western Afghanistan, the Taliban committed fifteen massacres against civilians, killing thousands of people between 1996 and 2001. They thought of Hazaras as infidels and consider us as bitter enemies.

When I was leaving Afghanistan for the United States, I was told to present Afghanistan in a positive light but we Afghans cannot hide the atrocities we have committed. Of course, there was improvement after the fall of Taliban. When I returned to Kabul in 2002, I attended school with students from Sunni and Shia backgrounds, which I thought would never happen. School chairs and tables became the platform for me to engage in inter-faith dialogue with other students. Our conversations were very important because we were listening and responding rather than reacting to each other as we had done during the civil war. Although religious tension still remains a problem in societies in Afghanistan, I personally believe that interfaith dialogue is very crucial for promoting peace and replacing sectarian violence.

As compelling as these stories are, we struggle, at times, to connect with international and multicultural students. In general, one of the hardest ways to engage students across their differences is to talk about faith. Students who are in the minority can be especially protective of their religious identities. Fear can shut people down so, in Journey Conversations, we decided that we would work to build an open process where everyone's spiritual experiences could be included in the discussion. We are conscious of the need to intentionally reach out to students from diverse backgrounds. In this way, Journey Conversations creates a safe space for conversations about spiritual identities across multiple differences.

Gifty Arthur, a Luther student from Ghana studying Management and Computer Science (class of 2017), and

a member of the Luther Congregation Council, expresses both her faith and the need for the welcoming presence of Journey Conversations in this way:

For me as a Christian, faith is about knowledge, belief, and behavior but, most importantly, it is about my relationship with God. This relationship reminds us of the everlasting love that God has for his people and the supernatural ways that God reveals himself through various personal encounters.

Journey Conversations offers a personal encounter with God as we engage our many differences and share the many ways that God chooses to be revealed in our lived experience.