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Spiritual Other/Spiritual Self: Models of Transformative Interfaith Work

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Introductory comments / thanks

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I have divided my comments this evening into two parts. First, I want to share some reflections with you about the nature of the work I do and why, I believe, it belongs in the curriculum of theological education. And, second, I will shift gears to talk more specifically about the relationship between the spiritual self and the spiritual other, drawing on the essays included in *My Neighbor's Faith: Stories of Interreligious Encounter, Growth and Transformation* for data.

Let me begin by saying I use the term "interfaith" to refer to all the work I do, academically and practically, that is geared towards strengthening relationships between people of different religious traditions.¹

Interreligious, multi-religious and multi-faith are also terms commonly used to refer to this same arena and there are good reasons to use or not use each of these different terms depending on the context. For example, 'interfaith' is not the operative word for this work if you are Jewish. "Interfaith" in a Jewish context connotes, first and foremost, interfaith marriage. So

¹ My remarks in this first section are adapted from a lecture I gave at Andover Newton Theological School, May 1, 2012.

when we were naming the Center shared by Hebrew College and Andover Newton, it made sense to call it CIRCLE - the Center for *Interreligious* and Communal Leadership Education (It also helped with our acronym).

However, for me as a Christian, “faith” is the word that best connotes my personal commitment to a living tradition and using the term “interfaith” suggests the encounter of individuals who come with their own personal commitments to particular traditions. So I use the term in part to acknowledge my own location - approaching this work as a Christian, located in a Christian seminary.

I also use the term interfaith because it reflects the lineage of my own formation that comes not just from my academic training, but also from my involvement in grassroots interfaith organizing.

In the late 90’s while I was diligently working on my doctorate in the Historical & Cultural Study of Religions here at the GTU, I began to feel dissatisfied with the wide gap I experienced between the *study of* and the *practice of* religions. This led me to join what was at the time a fledgling initiative called the United Religions Initiative (where I met Charles Gibbs – the founding executive director of the URI and one of our respondents today). As the youngest board member, I was charged with convening a group of young people at a conference the URI hosted in 1999 held at Stanford University. The group of young people who gathered became engaged in imagining a new organization designed specifically by and for youth. I still remember the conversations we had about whether to use interreligious or interfaith when it came to naming this new entity. There was a consensus among those of us gathered there that “faith” connoted more of a lived expression of individual beliefs and practices while “Religion” had a

more academic and institutional connotation. (In this we were, whether we knew it or not, roughly following Wilford Cantwell Smith's contrasting definitions of faith and religion). Thus we called ourselves the Interfaith Youth Core – an organization that has flourished and expanded under the leadership of Eboo Patel.

The work I do today is very much a synthesis of these two tracks of my own formation – interfaith organizing and academic training.

Having sketched my starting points, I want to make three assertions about interfaith work.

The first assertion comes from something my mother-in-law, Edie Howe, once said to me. We were talking about *The Daughters of Abraham* - a book group for Jewish, Christian and Muslim women that Edie founded in the wake of 9/11. Starting modestly with a single group in Cambridge, Massachusetts, it has now grown to more than 25 book groups across the country.

Describing the impact of the book group on her worldview, Edie said to me, "I now think in a sort of 3-D paradigm. I cannot think about Christianity without thinking about Judaism and Islam. They are inextricably linked in my mind forever."

What Edie was describing was a new consciousness. Like other consciousness-raising journeys it was transformative and forever changed the perceptual lens with which she viewed the world.

So, the first assertion I want to make is that **interfaith work is fundamentally consciousness-raising work**. The work of countering religious animosity shares many of the same challenges and dynamics that other consciousness-raising endeavors involve (whether we

are talking about racism, sexism, hetero-centrism, able-ism, classism, or any other area of systemic discrimination that operates in our particular 21st century context).

Understanding and critiquing the human tendency we have to imagine the Other in ways that constructs “Them” as less than “Us” and therefore not worthy of the same rights or respect, is perhaps, the **primary ethical imperative of interfaith work**.

Religious communities have been in this business of ‘otherizing’ for a very long time. In a book called, *Not God’s People: Insiders and Outsiders in the Biblical World* (2008), Lawrence Wills explores how the biblical texts construct a vision of the Other. Wills posits a set of theorems that offer a helpful matrix for understanding the inner workings of this process. For example, his second theorem says: “Just as the construction of the Other serves to construct the We, so also the construction of the We serves to construct the Other.” In other words, Wills’ explains, “The social practices that hold society together are affirmed by the We, while their opposite, which threaten to destroy social bonds, are projected onto the Other.” (Wills, 2008, p.13)

Not only is there an ethical task here but an educational task that is fundamental to theological formation. As Edie and many others have experienced, our religious self-understanding is intimately tied up with our understanding of religious others.

This brings me to my second assertion – **Interfaith work does not inherently lead to watered down religious identity but rather, evidence points to the opposite – this work can strengthen one’s own religious identity and sharpen one’s ability to articulate deeply held beliefs**. One way we describe this in CIRCLE is to say that this work helps rabbis be better rabbis and ministers be better ministers.

A story that illustrates this point comes from a year-long course I taught with my CIRCLE co-director, Rabbi Or Rose called, “Jewish & Christian Dialogue and Action.” One of our students was trained as an ‘interfaith minister’ and had been married to a woman who was Jewish. So he expected to ace the course. But after a year of participation in joint campus events, shared study, peer group reflections and class sessions, he had an insight that took him by surprise. When it comes to building connections across religious lines, it is not enough to simply celebrate our commonalities. As he wrote in his final reflection paper:

What I had yet to realize was that there is even more need to understand and appreciate each other’s differences, and in the process, move beyond tolerance, and beyond simply seeking the familiar...Not everything is a commonality, and that is perfectly okay. In fact, it is necessary. In our difference lies our dimensionality, our depth, our richness.

The impact of this insight on the student was that he decided to spend more time studying the particularities of his own Baptist roots. He wanted to return to the interfaith table better able to articulate the distinct contributions he had to offer out of a deeper understanding of his own religious identity.

While greater self-consciousness and a better understanding of the religious other are themselves sufficient reasons to engage in this work, my third assertion about interfaith work is this – *we need each other*. In other words, **Interfaith work is a practical imperative**.

Global challenges—such as persistent poverty, cultures of violence, ecological degradation—call on each of us to reach towards the deepest resources of our respective traditions and collectively bring them to bear on issues that none of us can address alone. Religious communities should be leading the way in tackling these tremendous problems rather than adding to them through acrimony across religious lines. I am still waiting for a time when the phase “religiously-motivated violence” is an oxymoron rather than a regular news headline.

We need interfaith work because we need to train our future religious leaders, scholars, community organizers, educators and preachers with the skills, knowledge, motivation, curiosity as well as the theological and ethical tools to reach across religious lines and work for the good of our common life.

So to reiterate my 3 assertions: interfaith work is consciousness-raising work, interfaith work strengthens rather than threatens particular religious identity, and interfaith work is a practical imperative.

While interfaith work can surely be described in many more ways and I look forward to your thoughts about this during our Q&A time, I want to turn now to talk briefly about recent developments in the emerging area of *interreligious or interfaith studies*.

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When I graduated from the GTU in 2005, my degree was in the *Historical and Cultural Study of Religions*. There was no such thing as “interfaith studies.” But now, I find myself at Andover Newton Theological School appointed as their first assistant professor of interfaith studies. And I am not alone. I have colleagues with similar titles – for example, last week I spoke at Claremont School of Theology on a panel with Najeeba Syeed-Miller who is the assistant professor of interreligious education. Beyond faculty titles, there are programs springing up at seminaries all over the country including the GTU’s Master’s degree program in interreligious studies.

In a major milestone for this emerging area, the American Academy of Religions just approved a new group this past December in “Interreligious and Interfaith Studies” that I co-chair with a colleague, Hodayra Ziad who is assistant professor of Islam at Trinity College. Our

steering committee highlights the inherent interdisciplinary nature of interfaith studies – an area of study that I would argue is as relevant for sociologists of religion as it is for comparative theologians – the committee includes: Diana Eck, Professor of Comparative Religion and Indian Studies (Harvard University); Paul Knitter, Professor of Theology, World Religions and Culture (Union Theological Seminary); John Makransky, Associate Professor of Buddhism and Comparative Theology (Boston College); Ravi M. Gupta, Associate Professor of Religious Studies (The College of William and Mary) and Rabbi Or Rose, Director, Center for Global Judaism (Hebrew College).

One last indicator worth mentioning, of the growing relevance of interfaith studies particularly for seminary educators is the recent round of revision to the standards set by the Association of Theological Schools (ATS) - the largest accrediting body for seminaries in the US and Canada. This past year they launched a project called, “Christian Hospitality and Pastoral Practices in a Multifaith Society.” They awarded 18 grants to member schools to help them “explore ways to integrate multifaith elements into their curricula.” And they convened a conversation with scholars and practitioners from the various ecumenical families as well as others “representing world faith” which resulted in a new standard for all M.Div students. Now if your school is accredited by ATS you must include a curricular component that responds to the ‘mutifaith context of contemporary society.’² Given the broad theological spectrum represented by ATS accredited schools, this is a noteworthy achievement.

² ATS website: <http://www.ats.edu/Pages/default.aspx> accessed January 20,2013. The full standard leaves a lot of room for theological interpretation: “MDiv education shall engage students with the global character of the church as well as ministry in the multifaith and multicultural context of contemporary society. This should include attention to the wide diversity of religious traditions present in potential ministry settings, as well as expressions of social justice and respect congruent with the institution’s mission and purpose.”

All of this goes to say, it is a great time to be doing this work. For those of us who have been at it for a long time under various guises, titles and departments, I am looking forward to thinking with you about the new questions and insights that might emerge from conversations under the rubric of *interreligious and interfaith studies*.

Part II: Spiritual Other/Spiritual Self

I want to spend the remainder of my time this evening talking about what is happening as we increasingly encounter each other across religious lines and begin to share our stories drawing on the collection in *My Neighbor's Faith*. Implicit in my remarks are some assumptions about what makes for transformative interfaith work.³

Professor John Makransky made a comment that intrigued me. Speaking as part of a panel of contributors to *My Neighbor's Faith* he said, "We Buddhists, Christians, Muslims, Jews, Hindus, Sikhs, Humanists, etc. *need* each other to liberate us from our own stories."

At the time his words struck me as both profoundly true and counter-intuitive. Sure, we need each other but why do we need to be liberated from our own stories?

His comment stayed with me. So I asked him about it a few weeks later through an exchange of emails. Here is how he elaborated on his initial remark:

The stories of our own tradition are foundational for us, orienting us to our religious identities and ways of being and understanding. But we all tend to get caught in the stories of our own tradition; imprisoned in them in ways not fully conscious to us. We get caught in a kind of idolatry that clings too exclusively, in too limited a way, to our own culturally conditioned current understandings of our own stories.

For this reason, we are dependent upon **religious others** to **liberate** us from bondage to our own stories. Religious others do this by sharing their stories,

³ My remarks in this section are adapted from a paper I presented at the American Academy of Religions in 2012 in Chicago.

which interrupt our own narratives and point beyond them to more of the richness of human perspectives and experiences, thereby opening us to further possible meanings in our own stories.

Part of what drew me to Makransky's comments is that they frame an insight that weaves through *My Neighbor's Faith* as a kind of subtext – We need each other in our very differences. Without the interruptions of the religious other, I cannot fully know myself, let alone my neighbor.

Marshall McLuhan, a 20th century Canadian philosopher of communication theory puts it this way; "We don't know who discovered water, but we know it wasn't the fish." We are all fish when it comes to our own stories. It is by talking to others and hearing their stories, that we learn what is particular in our own.⁴

But what is at stake here goes beyond knowledge of self and other. At stake is our own liberation. We cannot be free, as long as we stay trapped in narrow understandings of our own experiences framed through familiar narratives. Makransky's wonderfully visceral image of being trapped or liberated from our stories – as if our plot lines were prison bars – creates an unexpected association for me: Hayden White's *Tropics of Discourse*. I don't know if they still assign this kind of thing in graduate programs of religion, but I now appreciate having had to wade through White's dense text (more than I thought I would when initially reading it as part of my doctoral course work here at the GTU).

White helps me see behind the curtain so to speak – to see the staging, the scaffolding, the set designs that go into the production of any discourse. White explains it this way; "a discourse is itself a kind of model of the processes of consciousness by which a given area of

⁴ I first heard this quoted by Marshall Ganz in a lecture on Public Narrative that he gave at the Cambridge Friends School, April 2012 and credit Ganz with the insight that we are "all fish when it comes to our own stories."

experience, originally apprehended as simply a field of phenomena demanding understanding, is assimilated by analogy to those areas of experience felt to be already understood as to their essential natures.” (White, 1978, p. 5).

In other words, we understand what is unfamiliar by drawing analogies to what is familiar. We turn a transformative or novel experience into a story. We domesticate it in a sense. And we use the tools at hand, the rules we know, the traditional story lines. Is it a hero’s tale? A tragedy? A comedy? Or using the tropes of my Christian tradition, is this a conversion story? A tale of fall and redemption? In this way we cut and tailor what is initially a vast field of phenomena, data, and experience to fit what we know, what we need.

Implicitly, by its very structure, we make an argument about the nature of reality, the way things truly are. We make sense. We make meaning.

Anyone who has had an intense, memorable, or traumatic experience knows what White is talking about here. To move from the philosophical to the physical for a moment, from the general to the particular, my own understanding of the power and limits of stories came home to me after the birth of my first son. I had no words for the experience. It was beyond anything I had known previously.

It was a long labor and because I had decided to go the natural route at a birth center, I had no drugs until I transferred, about 24 hours later, to the hospital. I remember, in the wake of this experience, how absurd and inadequate it seemed that there was only this one word, “pain” to stand in for so many complex feelings and sensations.

For a long time, my experiences overwhelmed me, foiling any attempt to frame them as a story. My husband had to screen my calls for months, prefacing every conversation by warning;

“do not ask her about her birth experience.” Once I could talk about it, once I could tell the story, I knew I was recovering.

We love stories for their very limits. It can feel like a blessing to be able to distill chaos into something coherent. But because stories are so powerful, so orienting, we have a tendency to hold on to them. We can become overly attached to the story itself, overly rigid, overly identified with it. The danger of course, is forgetting that the story, any story, is not the entirety of the experience. This is where idolatry can come in – where we can begin to cling in too exclusively a way to our own current, culturally conditioned understanding of our own story as Makransky put it.

This brings me to one of the challenges of using personal narratives in interreligious dialogue; something I’ve come to refer to as “the tyranny of personal experience.” This phrase is one that emerged in a conversation I had many years ago with a Hindu nun. I met Sister Chundru through my work with the United Religions Initiative. She invited me to attend a monthly gathering she organized called “the circle of wise women,” which included women from a range of religious backgrounds. The format of these gatherings was simple; one or two women would tell their story (related to a monthly theme such as spiritual practices, youth leadership, motherhood, authority) and then we would all talk about the resonances, the differences, the questions that emerged.

I was talking to Sister Chundru one day about something that was bothering me. How can these stories lead to genuine conversation when they were so personal, so particular? What could I possibly add to someone else’s story? After all, everyone is the expert of her own personal experience. Sister Chundru listened and nodded, “Ahh yes, she said, “the tyranny of personal experience.”

Now in Berkeley, CA in the 90's when Sister Chundru made this comment, it was practically heresy to question the authority of personal experience. But Sister Chundru's insight stayed with me and primed me in many ways for Makransky's comment decades later – personal stories, personal experiences are powerful, important, sacred sources of data as we try to understand each other and ourselves. And, simultaneously, when held too tightly, in too limited a way, they become barriers to that same essential work.

Let me ground the foregoing comments in some specific examples from *My Neighbor's Faith*. Collectively, the stories tell us a lot about what can happen, what has happened when we open ourselves to the religious other and allow him or her to interrupt our own narratives. I will frame my comments and examples from the book around four assertions that build on my previous comments.

1. Our own personal narratives are encoded in the tropes of our respective traditions. This is one of the insights Makransky underscored that Hayden White's work elucidates. We can see this phenomena operating by simply looking at the three stories contributed by the editors. In "Holy Chutzpah: Lessons from William Sloane Coffin," Rabbi Or Rose recounts how he came to know one of his great teachers (one of his rabbis) in the person of this Christian minister. For Gregory Mobley, Biblical scholar and follower of Jesus, it is a revelation about Jesus prompted by a conversation with a rabbi that gets his attention in, "What the Rabbi Taught the Reverend about the Baby Jesus." Finally when I tell you that I grew up with Evangelical Christian roots, you may not be surprised to learn that my story centers on my conversion experience.

The rabbi was looking for a great teacher, the theologian for theological insight, and the Evangelical for a conversion story. While we follow tropes rooted in our relationship to our

respective traditions, there is also an interfaith twist in each story. What we discovered was somehow conveyed, revealed or embodied by the religious other. In this way, we integrate what is potentially foreign or unfamiliar (the religious other), into familiar story lines.

2. Telling our authentic stories requires and results in a certain degree of vulnerability. What my birth story has in common with many of the stories in this collection is that they are set in moments of intense physical, psychological, or spiritual vulnerability. To be vulnerable is to be exposed, to be at the limits of one's own resources, to be unsure – even defenseless. Vulnerability often has a negative connotation – it is a condition that makes us open to attack or criticism. But I want to suggest that when we are met with the appropriate support, resources or encouragement, when our vulnerabilities are exposed in the context of a trusting relationship, our very vulnerability creates the conditions for positive transformation.

Many of the encounters described in this book center around an experience of vulnerability when unexpected generosity or assistance emerges. Lori Patton's story takes place in India on the side of a deserted road notorious for its bandits. She is young, far from home, and the light is fading. Two women appear from a cane field, and perceiving Lori's vulnerability, the women simply sit on either side of her until help arrives. Samir Selmanovic writes about a crucial conversation with a Muslim cleric at a time of extreme spiritual vulnerability in the midst of his own conversion to Christianity. Valarie Kaur, a young Sikh, writes about how her anger and frustration living as a religious minority in a small farming town is met with compassion and understanding in her encounter with a white-haired church organist. We seem to be particularly open to new narratives, to being transformed, when we are vulnerable or at the limits of our own power and are met with unexpected kindness.

3. **Allowing others to break open our stories liberates us.** This is the assertion that particularly interests me. Several pieces in the collection hover around this moment of transformation including John Makransky's piece, "What Mast Ram Baba Dropped into My Bowl." In this story Makransky's conceptual framework as a young Buddhist, collapses in the face of a single, penetrating question by a Hindu guru he meets in India.

In Ruben Habito's piece, "A Christian Confronts a Zen Koan," we find a fascinating variation on this theme of liberation by the religious other. Habito becomes his own interreligious interlocutor, allowing the deep insights that emerge from living as both a Jesuit and a Zen Buddhist to enlighten and inform both dimensions of his religious identity.

But because you really need to read each of these stories in full to understand how the transformations unfolds, and because I don't want to give away the punch line in their stories, let me use details from my own essay to give you one more example of how this transformation can happen.

As I noted earlier, I wrote about my own conversion experience. What I didn't mention is that it took me about twenty years to realize that I couldn't tell my conversion story without including a conversation I had with a Muslim classmate the day after my numinous encounter. I was talking to a fellow classmate, Mohammed in the coffee shop at the School of Oriental and African Studies (where I was studying for my junior year abroad). After telling him what happened to me on my weekend Church retreat Mohammed said, "I have a very good friend who described almost the exact same experience. He cried for three days and now he is devoted to Allah." For years I left Mohammed's comments out. I just didn't see them as part of *my* story. But ultimately I realized that these comments freed me from holding too tightly to my own culturally-conditioned, current understanding of my story. As I note in the book, "Directly on

the heels of my own most sacred moment, the moment when I learned there was something profound and undeniably real at the heart of my faith – I was invited to make room for the undeniably real at the heart of someone else’s faith. At the moment when my religious identity could have been narrowly defined in Christian terms, it was broken open by this other story.”

4. My final assertion is this: **We have a choice when it comes to the potentially transformative role of personal narratives in interfaith work.** We can repeat our familiar stories, with their unchanging endings, remaining trapped in a static, single narrative of *what happened*; an idealized, idolatrized version of *our story*. And we can listen to others’ stories, buckling to the tyranny of personal experience, adding no insights, ignoring our own curiosity, and leaving the firm boundaries of other’s stories undisturbed.

Or we can choose a different route. We can choose to engage, to question, to explore, to respond. Letting our stories become a meeting ground where the unexpected can happen. Allowing the religious other to liberate us from our own stories even as we liberate them, each returned with fresh eyes, to a richer understanding of the greater human story in which we all have a part.

So let me end with this refrain: We need each other, Buddhists, Christians, Muslims, Jews, Hindus, Sikhs, Humanists. We need to tell our stories, listen to other stories and interrupt the narratives that may be unconsciously imprisoning us. We need to encourage genuine encounters where mutual transformation is possible.

Not only is it the way we fish will come to discover the water we swim in, or how we humans will get to know the neighbors we share this planet with, but it is the way we as religious scholars, activists and educators in this emerging area of interreligious and interfaith studies

might contribute to the collective work of learning to live together in light of our differences with the mutual regard and creativity that our fractured communities so clearly require.