



The interfaith leader and American Muslim Eboo Patel shares the following story. He writes,

On the morning of [September 11, 2001], John [Tateishi, the Executive Director of the Japanese American Citizens League] was heading south on I-5 out of Seattle, driving to an early meeting. He was causally turning the radio dial when he caught the news of the first plane hitting the tower. He turned the volume up and listened as the second plane hit, the towers collapsed, and threats directed at Muslims started to pour in. He turned his car around and called his assistant. "Cancel my meetings for the rest of the week," he said. "And start calling our regional directors. The focus of our organization has just become about the protection of American Muslims."

On 9/11, you see, in that moment, in his car on the highway, John Tateishi was remembering one of his earliest memories, which was the day he and his family were released from an internment camp where Japanese Americans were forced to live during World War II. When he and his family were released from the camp, he remembers his father holding him by the shoulders and saying, "Son, do not forget this moment, and do not let America forget. This country is too good for what it did to us."

Fast forward to 9/11, 2001. When John heard the news and he knew exactly what needed to be done. Interfaith activist and Muslim American leader Eboo Patel shares his story, because Tateishi taught him an important lesson about what it means to be American. Patel asked Tateishi why, as the director of the Japanese American Citizens League, he saw the need in 2001 to pivot towards support for American Muslims. Tateishi told him *how grateful he was for the people who stood up for Japanese Americans during World War II. Had there been more, he believed, the internment camps would never have happened. When it was his turn to protect another community, it was his responsibility to take it. The most American thing you can do is stand up for someone else.*

Tateishi took his stand with and for our Muslim neighbors over 15 years ago. I'm sure he hoped the work would not be so long, and the need never be greater than in that moment, on that terrible morning. Instead, the long struggle continues, my spiritual friends, and here we are, over fifteen years later, still hearing our leaders portray American Muslims as terrorists rather than neighbors, still hearing Islam equated with extremism rather than understood as a wide and deep religious identity held by over one billion people, as diverse in practice, belief, and culture as Christianity or any other global faith. It is never a singular Islam that we are talking about, but rather a plural Islams full of nuances, internal disagreements, theological debates, liberal and conservative wings and long-ranging controversies that are yet unsettled, that are still emerging.

We have failed, Patel writes in his most recent book, *Sacred Ground: Pluralism, Prejudice, and the Promise of America*, on which this sermon is based. We have failed. We who believe in pluralism, we who believe in interfaith and intercongregational cooperation, we who believe that people of different beliefs and backgrounds can create meaningful communities together, we have failed.

He writes,

...the movement I belong to has failed to replace the image of Muslims as terrorists with that of Muslims as neighbors... Those of us in interfaith work let other leaders define America as a nation that ought to be

suspicious of one of its religious communities. That tragedy should be felt far beyond the community of people who pray toward Mecca.

Earlier this week, the President of the United States delivered his State of the Union address. The word America and American appeared many times, as doubtless it has in every President's address through the years. But this time I heard it so differently, my spiritual friends. When President Trump says, in the midst of a painful debate about our broken nightmare of an immigration system that is tearing families apart every day, "Americans are dreamers too," I can almost see the wall coming up before us. Who or what is an American, in these troubled times.

When Eboo Patel was growing up, he wrestled mightily with each of his inherited identities: American, Indian, Muslim. Or was it Muslim, American, Indian? All of the above, or none? *My adolescence*, he writes, *was a series of rejections, one after another, of the various dimensions of my heritage, in the belief that America, India, and Islam could not exist within the same being. If I wanted to be one, I could not be the others.*

Patel's struggle to resist an either/or approach to identity plays out in a thousand ways every day, at least for many of the people I know – people like many of you, who have moved between different communities in your life and realized that the boxes we create for one another are far too small for the richness of experiences we try to fit into them.

At different times in my life, I have been told that any and all of these identities cannot hold true at the same time, and that instead, I have to choose: white or anti-racist; mother or minister; smart or faithful.

At the borders of those identities, I've searched for bridge-builders, people who challenge the lie of an either/or universe by living their lives in the integrity of multiple identities. White and anti-racist. Mother and minister. Smart and faithful.

Patel's story and my own overlap in these borderlands, and we have also both encountered the fierce challenge of the border patrol. *I would never marry outside my faith*, a Jewish friend told me at a dinner many years ago, even as he was making plans to attend my Unitarian Universalist-Jewish-Christian multifaith wedding. *You can't belong to two faith communities at the same time*, he said. *You have to choose.*

And day by day, year by year, I do choose. I choose both/and. I choose to reject the simplistic and dangerous demands of an either/or narrative for my life or my world. I choose to live in the integrity of multiple identities.

Patel also lives in the reality of a both/and world. American and Muslim and Indian. He believes the story of the 21st century will not be that of the color line, but the faith line. The faith line, he writes, is not drawn between Jew and Christian, or Muslim and Hindu, but between what he calls *religious pluralism* and *religious totalitarianism*. On one side of the faith line, religious totalitarians say that only one way of being religious is legitimate, and all others are false. On the other, religious pluralists say that there are multiple ways of being religious, and the wellbeing of all is dependent on learning to live and thrive together. (Acts of Faith, xv).

Patel's life goal is to nurture, encourage, and equip religious pluralists. And I know he would find this community to be fertile ground for such a process. Those of us who heard the Statements of Faith of the ROP youth last Sunday could hear and see exactly how this community embodies our third UU principle, *acceptance of one another and encouragement to spiritual growth*, in the voices of the youth, who found common ground as well as points of distinct difference in their beliefs. At the same time, Patel writes,

My struggle to understand the traditions I belong to as mutually enriching rather than mutually exclusive is the story of a generation of young people standing at the crossroads of inheritance and discovery, trying to look both ways at once. There is a strong connection between finding a sense of inner coherence and developing a commitment to pluralism. And that has everything to do with who meets you at the crossroads. (Acts of Faith, xvii).

Who met you at the crossroads, at the intersection of inheritance and discovery, as you looked down both ways in your life, my spiritual friends?

In my own life, my parents' decision to raise a family overseas – a decision I did not choose, a fundamental life choice I inherited from them – set me on a course toward religious and cultural pluralism at an early age, and from my birth until age 18 I spent more time living outside the United States, in Japan, India, and Israel, than I did within it. I was born in Tokyo, Japan, and lived in that country for seven years, but I also lived in suburban Maryland, in a house on a tree-lined street that was perfect for trick-or-treating. About the time I would have been participating in a Rites of Passage, if we'd been members of a UU congregation, we moved to India, and I graduated from the international high school there five years later.

It is harder to think of my religion, my language, my skin color, my books, and my songs as the only ones, and the best ones, having spent so much of my growing up years surrounded by the religions, languages, skin colors, books, and songs of others.

And what I have to wonder at now, is how my mom – a math teacher from Kansas – and my dad -- and a diplomat from California came to raise their new family at the crossroads, rather than back home in a more familiar community. What were they moving toward? What were they leaving behind?

In fact, when I consider my multicultural childhood, particularly my high school years in New Delhi, I sometimes think my family intended to set up camp at the crossroads, rather than face the perceived limitations of any one path. Sometimes people with my background are called "third culture kids" for this reason, people who are rarely at home in one community and instead constantly seek out bridges between communities.

Ironically, Third Culture Kids end up being most comfortable among other third culture kids – people who are like them exactly because they have multiple identities, too. Sometimes I think, as an American Unitarian Universalist who grew up overseas, I have more in common with an Indian Hindu who grew up in Bahrain, a French Christian who grew up in Indonesia, or even an American Muslim from India, than I do with my neighbors in Santa Monica.

In my own life, I've found it much easier to cross international borders in Israel and India than to cross the borders of race and class in American cities like Boston or LA. And in every case, when I have made it across the few crucial miles separating Cambridge and Roxbury, Montana and Pico, or Santa Monica and South Los Angeles, it is because of the work of other bridge-builders. As I have approached the crossroads of inheritance and discovery, these teachers have nurtured and encouraged me to move towards a pluralist future.

In building that future, I take to heart Patel's warnings against the twin monsters that threaten good work in religious pluralism. He calls them the "Scylla and Charybdis of interfaith work."

The Scylla, he writes, is the notion that we're all the same. I wash my hands before I pray; you wash your hands before you pray, everything else is details. (Acts of Faith 167)

One of my teachers has called this approach to interfaith work the “lowest common denominator,” a way of reducing the richness of multiple faith traditions down to common ground so low it is bound to be trampled upon. Buoyed by the best of intentions – creating community, linking people of difference experiences together – this kind of interfaith work, like the Scylla, the twelve-tentacled sea monster Patel compares it to, grinds up and devours all the important bits of religious difference, silencing the way that, for example, my husband’s experience of being raised Jewish shaped and defined parts of his life in ways that are important and different from my own, which was shaped by the unique experiences of being raised Christian.

...the differences between religions are extremely important, writes Patel. As a devout Muslim, I certainly want to preserve the uniqueness of my religion. But you can go too far in that direction, right into the jaws of Charybdis, which is thinking that religious differences are so great that we can't even talk.

To avoid the dangerous current of this whirlpool, people of faith and conscience are called to consider what their tradition or ethical principles say *about universal values through its particular set of scriptures, rituals, and heroes*. Through the lens of particularity, what does your tradition tell you about what is important and how to live a life of meaning and purpose? This question leads us to identify the highest common denominator of interfaith experience, where pluralistic communities can flourish.

This question is of particular resonance for Unitarian Universalists, who have special gifts to offer to religious pluralism because so many of our people, whether they inherited Unitarian Universalism or chose it at the crossroads of later parts of life’s path – so many of our people are multifaith people, who live lives of purpose and conscience enriched not by one source or tradition, but by at least six. Yet even we cannot turn away from the hard work of identifying and articulating what our chosen faith – Unitarian Universalism – has to teach us and the world about universal values through the lens of our own scriptures, rituals, and heroes. Over the past two weeks, that’s exactly what your Board of Directors and your Rites of Passage groups have done – they have reflected on our living tradition itself, and how it has been important to them in their lives. And this is -- a powerful act of faith.

Despite the enthusiasm of UU communities like this one, in the 10 years since Patel’s autobiography was published, it is hard to argue that religious pluralism has gained ground. Instead, suspicion of our Muslim neighbors, xenophobia, and Islamophobia have been on the rise, even here in LA, where the cosmopolitan globalism of our city actually does put Protestants, Jews, Catholics, Evangelicals, Muslims, UUs, people of faith and people of no faith side by side on a daily basis. And in a more recent book [Sacred Ground] Patel reminds us that unfortunately, America has a long history of suspicion and mistreatment of immigrant communities who also represent religious difference.

Many here may remember that it was not too long ago that the religious enemy of America – or at least, Evangelical and Protestant America-- was not Muslim, but Catholic. In 1959, when the Gallup poll came out, over ¼ of Americans said they would not vote for a Catholic for president (Patel, Sacred Ground, 41). You may remember how the Kennedy campaign worked with this issue, by distancing their candidate from his religious identity, even as Evangelical leaders raised fears of “Catholic domination” of US government. Needless to say, when Kennedy was elected, such fears did not come to pass. And in the next two generations, most non-Catholic Americans met and became friends with Catholics. Patel writes, they “learned to admire things about the faith, and that the fears of Catholic domination were unfounded.”

Unfortunately, the same is not true for American Muslims. Today, 46% of Americans identify as Protestant, and 20% of Americans identify as Catholic, and only 1% as Muslim. Not enough of those of us who do not identify as Muslim have friends and positive relationships with American Muslims.

Yet even here, standing at the crossroads between fear and familiarity, Neighborhood Church has made a bridge-building choice, again and again, by seeking out relationships with local Muslim communities that are authentic, intimate, and mutually enriching. Your Social Justice Coordinator, Stephanie, reminded me that the Building Bridges Task Force has been meeting for almost ten years, and will be offering a six-week exploration on "Islam for Inquisitive Minds" this spring, beginning on Tuesday, March 20th, and continuing through Tuesday, April 24th. The class is offered by Muslim friends of the church and includes six dinners; although there is a \$30 registration fee, no one will be turned away for lack of funds. Neighborhood's longstanding commitment here is worth sharing and celebrating; to share a meal and learn together is a rich opportunity to fight back against fear and Islamophobia. Why not consider inviting a friend who may not have had the benefit of this community before to join you for the class this time – even if you have taken it before – a friend perhaps from school, work, or other parts of your community life who can help Neighborhood join with the 1% of Americans who are Muslim -- and remember that all together, we are 100% of America.

When he was growing up, an American Muslim from India in suburban Chicago, Patel learned a Christian song about faith at a YMCA camp. When his father heard him singing it, he was worried. He asked Patel's mother if the camp leaders were trying to teach his son Christianity with all these songs.

I hope so, his mother said. I hope they teach the kids Jewish and Hindu songs, too. That's the kind of Muslims we want our kids to be. (Acts of Faith, 16).

In this congregation we sing Christian songs, Jewish songs, Muslim songs, and Hindu songs, too. Because that's the kind of Unitarian Universalists we want our kids to be, and that's the kind Unitarian Universalists we want to be, too. The kind that meet people at the crossroads of their lives with open arms and hearts, the kind given to

*marrying each other,
reading each other's books,
singing each other's songs, laughing?*

Oh, say can you see... From the words of the poet, who told us

*When I fail to have this vision before
the eyes of the heart, daily, hourly,
written into my pulse and breath,
tattooed in them as a saving text,
then come...Peace, Salaam, Shalom...
annoy me, burn in me, jar me, jostle me,
overcome me, shake me, startle me,
until I am willing to see what must be
even more clearly than I see what is.
And let me never again be embarrassed by my vision,
nor ever again confounded.*

(Mark Belletini, Solemn Te Deum for Peace, Sonata for Voice and Silence, 78).

May it be so.

Sources

Eboo Patel, *Sacred Ground: Pluralism, Prejudice, and the Promise of America*, 2012, and *Acts of Faith*, 2007.

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