

## INTERFAITH INSIGHT

## Transformational narratives that expand our group identity

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Last month, I was invited to a symposium with the staff and board members of the Fetzer Institute in Kalamazoo, seeking to explore a “New Narrative for a Global Movement for Spiritual Transformation.”

Others included scientists, health professionals, educators and spiritual leaders from Jewish, Sufi and Buddhist traditions, as well as representatives from the Dalai Lama Fellows, Interfaith Youth Core, Museum of World Religions and various contemplative groups.

It would not be possible to summarize all of the rich discussion and contributions made during this three-day experience, but let me share a few reflections.

A basic premise of the symposium was that reality is more than just the material.

This has been affirmed by

the modern understanding of quantum physics, as well as the medical impact of the placebo effect. It is certainly at the core of all of the religious traditions seeking meaning and ultimate purpose.

From a biological perspective, it is clear that we receive our genetics as a material transfer from our parents, but after birth, our survival depends on a community of caring, which begins with the family, as well as kin groups, tribes, villages.

As societies became larger and more complex, the caring community was expanded as cities, states and nations provided education, various support structures and even the defense necessary to survive potential enemy attack.



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Our tribal identity goes far beyond the people we could possibly know personally and is often carried by various symbols or markers.

For example, it is not hard to tell who is in your tribe and who might be from the competing tribe when one attends a Michigan vs. Michigan State football game.

The colors — maize and blue vs. green and white — give clear markers of the competing identities. It is natural to find and support our identity group with whom we have loyalty.

Unfortunately, it also is natural to be threatened and to attack, even to the point of violence, those we perceive as not in our tribe.

In most sports examples, this rivalry is pretty benign, but in other situations the competition can become destructive and violent.

When our basic identities as

a nation, or as a religious community, become threatened, it is easy to demonize the other and reinforce our own identity by attacking the identity of the competing group.

Narratives or stories are often the way we reinforce and carry our various group identities.

Religious narratives, not only build identity of who we consider to be in our tribe, but also become the containers for our basic human values.

It is all too easy, however, to focus on differences in our stories, rituals and beliefs rather than the deeper values that nearly all religious narratives support and teach.

As our discussion moved to developing a global narrative the importance of the transformational narratives embedded in our religious communities became clear to me.

In the Jewish tradition, the

Exodus provides the narrative that describes the movement from slavery to freedom; for Muslims, the needed transformation is from pride to submission to the divine; for Buddhists it is moving from suffering to acceptance; and for Christians it is the transformation from death to life.

The power of all of these transformative narratives must be affirmed as we seek a global movement that will enhance our spiritual development.

Yes, reality is more than the material.

From the moment of birth when we make the physical separation, we are launched into a community of caring, love, support and protection.

That community soon extends far beyond family. We must now affirm that our very survival depends on the whole of humanity, as well as the earth, our global home.

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