

INTERFAITH INSIGHT

In times of fear, will we respond with courage and faith?

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Will our religious faith be tested in the months and years ahead? Standing for what is right, sometimes, demands courage.

Unfortunately, there has been an increase of hate speech and acts of hate in our current environment and our response may be put to the test.

In a recent article, Eboo Patel, the interfaith leader and founder of the Interfaith Youth Core, wrote about his fellow Chicagoan, Rami Nashashibi, whose deep Muslim faith inspires him to work for social justice in the poor neighborhoods of South Chicago.

While with his three children in his neighborhood park, he realized that it was time for the scheduled prayer Muslims do five times a day.

However, Patel wrote in *Sojourners*, it was just a few "days after the terrible terrorist attack in San Bernardino, where extremists calling themselves Muslims murdered 14 people and injured many more ... He found himself suddenly struck by fear at the thought of praying in public and therefore being openly identified as Muslim at a time

when so many equated that term with terrorist."

Patel goes on to relate an incident 50 years prior in that same Chicago park, when Martin Luther King Jr. was leading a march protesting housing discrimination. King also was fearful because of the racists who had threatened violence. He was hit in the head and knocked down by a brick that was thrown his way.

Nashashibi was aware of that incident and, in fact, had been working to erect a statue of King in that very area.

In Patel's words: "In that same place, 50 years apart, two men of different faiths faced a similar question: Would their faith be the victim of fear or the source of courage? Thousands of fellow protesters were watching King. Three Muslim children were watching Nashashibi."

Despite his misgivings, he refused to teach his children fear. So he put his prayer rug down and began his prayers.

In Nashashibi's words, "I want them to understand that, sometimes, faith will be tested, and that we will be asked to show immense courage, like others have before us, to make our city, our country, and our world a better reflection of all our ideals."

At the National Prayer Breakfast last year,

President Barack Obama spoke about the danger of fear.

"Fear can lead us to lash out against those who are different, or can lead us to succumb to despair, or paralysis, or cynicism. Fear can feed our most selfish impulses, and erode the bonds of community. It is a primal emotion — fear — one that we all experience. And it can be contagious, spreading through societies, and through nations. And if we let it consume us, the consequences of that fear can be worse than any outward threat."

Obama then spoke from his own Christian faith, quoting from II Timothy: "For God has not given us a spirit of fear, but of power and of love and of a sound mind." (1:7)

Obama continued, "For me, and I know for so many of you, faith is the great cure for fear... God gives us the courage to reach out to others across that divide, rather than push people away. He gives us the courage to go against the conventional wisdom and stand up for what's right, even when it's not popular."

Sometimes, courage is also required to stand up for someone else who is under threat.

Obama went on to relate the story of the late Master Sgt. Roddie Edmonds, of the 422nd Infantry Regiment in the United

States Armed Forces, who had been recognized by Yad Vashem, the World Holocaust Remembrance Center in Jerusalem.

He is the first American soldier to be named as Righteous Among the Nations for rescuing Jewish servicemen at a POW Camp in Germany during World War II.

When Edmonds, the Christian prisoner, was ordered to identify which of the soldiers were Jewish, he ordered all of the troops to line up, all 1,000 of them.

The Nazi colonel said, "I asked only for the Jewish POWs. These can't all be Jewish."

Sgt. Edmonds stood there and said, "We are all Jews."

And the colonel took out his pistol and held it to the master sergeant's head and said, "Tell me who the Jews are."

And he repeated, "We are all Jews." Faced with the choice of shooting all 1,000 soldiers, the Nazis relented.

Through his courage and faith, Sgt. Edmonds saved the lives of 200 of his Jewish fellow soldiers.

In the days ahead, many of us may be faced with choices requiring courage as we seek to protect and love those among us who are being threatened in a potential climate of fear.

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