

INTERFAITH INSIGHT

Being inspired by teachers, mentors, friends



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In 1963 I was a graduate student in mathematics at the University of Chicago when my theological interests drew me to what became a two-year detour into the divinity school at that university. In that same year, Martin Marty was appointed to a faculty position in church history, and I enrolled in one of his classes. I still remember some of the details of that class, and the paper I wrote on the famous ecumenical leader of the mid-20th century, Archbishop of Canterbury William Temple.

I ended up back in mathematics and later came to Grand Valley State University, where I served as dean of science for more than 20 years.

Marty retired from the University of Chicago in 1998, and the university created the Martin Marty Center to recognize the enormous impact he had made not only on the university and its students but also on the religious world through his writing and speaking. His prodigious career includes more than 60 books, more than 1,000 articles and book chapters, numerous awards and honorary degrees, and over 100 doctoral students. Just to give you a flavor, just since his retirement in 1998 he published eight books, 26 chapters in books, and 75 articles.

This month is the 20th anniversary of the Martin Marty Center and also Marty's 90th birthday. Marty is important to the Kaufman Interfaith Institute because he was most helpful in advising Sylvia and

Dick Kaufman as well as me in the institute's early days. He had also been one of the speakers in the early interfaith dialogues in Muskegon, the moderator of the 2006 and 2009 Jewish-Christian-Muslim Dialogues and the featured speaker in the 2011 interfaith consortium conference.

WEEKLY INSPIRATION

It has been a great joy to renew my relationship with him these past few years as the Kaufman Institute has developed. One of my regular weekly readings is the column sent out from the Martin Marty Center. Titled "Sightings," it comes each Monday and Thursday to my email account. The Monday column is written by Martin Marty, and the Thursday column by someone else reflecting on religion and public life.

Another important influence for our interfaith work has been Eboo Patel, the founder and president of the Interfaith Youth Core, which is active on hundreds of college campuses by inspiring students to be involved in interfaith service. He recently has been in our area speaking at Aquinas College, Calvin College and Grand Valley State University and will be returning this year to participate in the triennial Jewish-Christian-Muslim Dialogue in November.

Last week, Patel shared his relationship and admiration for Marty in one of the Sightings columns. He tells of his early encounter with Marty as he was formulating his ideas for the Interfaith Youth Core. In 2002 he was finishing his doctoral thesis and struggling to launch his new organization, which wasn't going well. He writes:

"I heard that Martin Marty was speaking at a benefit dinner in Chicago. I bought a \$65 ticket, a significant purchase for me at the time, and planted myself at the doorway outside the banquet hall. When Marty approached, I about accosted him. My words tumbled out so fast — something about being inspired by his scholarship and wanting his advice — that I'm surprised he understood anything I said. But he must have recognized the combination of eagerness and nervous energy and ... said it sounded interesting and sure, come on by to his office in Riverside."

The meeting led to Marty's involvement in the early IFYC conferences where his name was a draw and brought recognition to the emerging organization. He participated in a PBS interview and talked about the "importance of engaging young people on college campuses in interfaith work."

'MOMENTS SPARKLE IN MY MEMORY'

Patel reflects on how Marty talked to the staff, "offering encouragement for the difficult day-to-day work of building a non-profit organization. Every once in a while, he would invite me to tag along when he was speaking at a public event in Chicago. 'Why don't you join me on stage, Eboo,' he would say.

"Every one of those moments sparkle in my memory. I am as grateful for them now as I was then."

Patel recalls the personal encounters with Marty. "He showed me pictures of his kids — he'd adopted several. 'When I got home from the university or a college lecture, mostly

I belonged to my kids,' he would say. 'You know, throwing the football around in the yard. As the kids got older and started going their separate ways with friends and the like, we decided on a Sabbath. Saturday evenings to Sunday mornings we would spend together as a family.'

"He wasn't giving me advice directly, but I'm not dumb, I took note. After all, the subtext was clear: go ahead and accomplish things, kid, but know what matters and center that."

Patel goes on to acknowledge Marty's incredibly productive career, which included some 3,000 public talks with rarely missing a class. He comments that his resume "sounds superhuman. But when you meet Marty, it feels like you are in the presence of someone who is just very fully human.

"I learned from Marty that you can be critical without being mean, that if you take the world apart in your writing, you have a responsibility to try to put it back together in improved form.

"There is a story in the Jewish tradition about a student going to see a great rabbi, not principally to study Torah or Talmud, but to watch how the rabbi ties his shoes. That's how I came to regard my sessions with Marty."

I have been truly blessed to have mentors and friends like Martin Marty and Eboo Patel. They inspire me to continue the interfaith work of the Kaufman Institute and to do what I can to make my community and the world a better place.

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