

INTERFAITH INSIGHT

Transforming interfaith stories of holy surrender

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Sarah, Hagar and Mary were women of grace, women of great suffering, women of beauty, women of varying skin tones and women of obedience to God and not man.

Each of them is a gift, and each of them sacred. Their lives weave into one another, and as they do, we are transformed by their lives and really have no other choice but to be woven into their interfaith tapestry. Understanding each of them in this greater context gives us the full picture of our own faith story.

I invite you to listen to a story, the story of my own mother. Felisa Carrion Solis is one of 14 children. She was born in Puerto Rico and immigrated to the United States when she was 12 years old. She met my father, Andres, an immigrant from Mexico, who arrived in this country when he was 18. But I tell the story of my mother's presence as she is today, because it is through her I fully understand the interfaith experience.

You see, my mother has Alzheimer's disease, an illness that slowly strips one of memory and of life's stories. She is in her last stages, but it seems I have been saying she has been in her last stage for the past couple of years. It is rare to hear a recognizable word from her, except for occasionally I will hear "que linda," which means "how

cute" in Spanish, when I lift a doll with a warm facial expression in her line of vision. She is dependent on others for all her daily living activities, weighs a little over 90 pounds, and her life is a mystery of how she holds on from day to day.

My mother today continues to teach me life lessons and is presently showing me the intersection between the human condition and the holy surrender. She resides in an assisted living facility in Ann Arbor, and I do my best to see her every weekend. Our visits are still filled with connection as she maintains a strong grip as I hold her hand. At times, I believe our souls connect as I find that visual space where she sees me and smiles for a second or two until she fades out again; these are brief moments that last a lifetime for me.

Daily she surrenders to her physical condition, and daily her peace is strengthened. She has taught me about the holy surrender and has inspired me more to search for the understanding of holy surrender, a surrender that Mary, Sarah and Hagar knew of wholeheartedly and embraced with a resounding yes.

I rely on my faith and spiritual life to make sense of the day-to-day life of my mother, and I find myself on a journey to find the relationship with the divine that allows

holy surrender to be even possible.

I often enter Mary's story to understand holy surrender. Mary was a young girl when she was visited by the angel Gabriel, who spoke to her saying: "do not be afraid; you have won God's favor. Look! You are to conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you must name him Yeshua/Jesus," which conveys the meaning God delivers or saves. And at the moment of Mary's holy surrender, her suffering begins.

My own faith tradition helps me enter into Mary's story, I know she:

- ▶ Experienced the life of a pregnant teen who probably lost favor with her community because of her out-of-wedlock pregnancy.
- ▶ That she lived a life in poverty, and lived on minimal means.
- ▶ That she lived a life of a refugee and immigrant as she and her family were forced to leave their homeland for fear of persecution.
- ▶ And she lived life as a mother who never abandoned her son and bore witness to his great suffering and gruesome death on a cross, loving him each step in his holy surrender.

But in my entering into the life of Mary to understand her holy surrender, I cannot stop at the boundaries of my own faith tradition. To understand Mary, then, I look to the context of her world during the time of her earthly existence. She was born into Judaism; her faith was formed by listening to or

perhaps reading the Torah and listening to the stories of the prophets in the synagogue. This is the faith tradition she followed, and it is this faith that played a role in her love for the divine.

I can only imagine she sought refuge in the stories of Sarah and Hagar and found commonality. They all share powerful birthing stories that ask of any mother in the role of birthing to understand holy surrender. These women played significant roles in giving birth to the faith traditions many of us follow today.

Leaning in, understanding and respecting the faith of others does not mean that I need to give up my own traditions, but by moving closer to the other, my own faith formation develops. The story of my relationship with my mother has influenced my own approach to interfaith experiences. The search for holy surrender is a surrender to love — love of self, love of neighbor and love of God.

While there are days I leave my mother's bedside wondering if it would be the last day that I touch and see her, and at times pray that God with infinite wisdom would take her to rest eternally, most days I leave with such a holy appreciation for how her spirit continues to transform mine.

Shortly after the Abrahamic Dinner where I shared these insights, I received a call from Hospice that she was declining. I am at peace because she finally rests in peace.

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