

## INTERFAITH INSIGHT

## Our identities are enhanced when we relate to others



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Jennifer Howe Peace, professor at Andover Newton Seminary, wrote an article titled "The Value of Interreligious Education for Religious Leaders." She tells the story of Basma, a Muslim from Egypt, in one of her classes where they were sharing sacred texts from the various traditions. Peace writes:

"Soft-spoken by nature, Basma tended to listen more than speak. But one day she raised her hand and began describing how limited her encounters with non-Muslims had been before coming to the United States and how varied and rich her experiences had been since arriving. She ended by saying: 'Our experiences change who we are.' ... The next day, Basma raised her hand again, and said, a bit more slowly, 'Our experiences change who we are.'"

Peace explains how this simple assertion contains three valuable ideas important to all interreligious experience: the power of encounters, emphasis on transformative learning and the impact of identity formation.

When we encounter a person of a different faith, she writes, we "move beyond an exclusively intellectual focus on the basic tenets of the world religions to a broader relational awareness of how individuals enact their beliefs and values in particular times and places. Interfaith encounters enable us to learn with and not simply about one another."

The second insight from "Our experiences change who we are" is transformational. We change. The encounter leads us not only to knowledge of who others are and about what others believe, but leads us to a deeper understanding of our own faith commitment. Peace writes that our awareness "is not characterized by a weakening of religious commitment, but rather a more nuanced understanding of the complex relationship among religious people, ideas and practices." She tells about a Baptist student in the class who was inspired to study more deeply into his own tradition, in order to be "better equipped to articulate the distinct contributions he had to offer out of a deeper understanding of his own religious roots."

Finally, "Our experiences change who we are." Basma's comment, Peace writes, "suggests that she was no longer the same person as when she arrived from Egypt." Our religious identity is enriched and broadened as we encounter others in our communities. The encounters with those who are different bring new insight and learning, not only about others but also about ourselves. Religious identity can bring people together who think alike, but there is also the danger of not growing or developing a deeper understanding of our own beliefs.

Peace is one of our speakers at the Jewish-Christian-Muslim Dialogue coming on Nov. 15. Another one of the speakers at our dialogue on "Religious Diversity: Dividing or Uniting," is Rabbi Elliot Cosgrove, chief rabbi at Park Avenue Synagogue in New York City. In one of his sermons, "What We Don't Know," he points to this human tendency "to see every argument, every conflict and every fight from our own perspective — always we are right and the other person is wrong." This is certainly obvious in the current polarization dominating our political discourse.

Quoting the words of Atticus Finch in the novel "To Kill a Mockingbird," Cosgrove writes, "... one can never really understand a person until you climb into his skin and walk around in it." We can never really climb into another's skin, but we can listen and be open to the other's ideas, beliefs, concerns and even their hurts.

Cosgrove urges humility not only regarding another's beliefs but also regarding their needs. Ethical behavior requires an awareness and an empathy of someone else's feelings and "circumstances different than one's own." On the other hand, "unethical behavior, cruelty and thoughtlessness ... can usu-



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**Eboo Patel is founder and president of the Interfaith Youth Core.**

ally be traced back to the presumption of believing that we know another's condition better than we (actually) do." Thus, he continues, "Gaps in empathy are inevitable when we presume to know that which only God knows."

Humility, in not claiming to know all that God knows, is thus fundamental to ethical behavior as well as living together in peace when we come with different traditions, beliefs and commitments. One of the misperceptions about interfaith efforts is that all religions are alike. This is not true, and it would be presumptuous to make such a claim, because we cannot see all religions from a God's eye perspective. I am on a path that reflects my understanding from my limited perspective. I can know what God has revealed to me, but I cannot claim to have all knowledge regarding how God might be working and revealing to others.

Another misconception is that interfaith efforts are based on some kind of relativism. This is also not the case. The response to both issues is that our interfaith efforts are based on a humility that affirms that we are not God and do not have God's complete knowledge. It is the realization that I am a limited and finite human, while God is infinite and beyond complete human comprehension.

Eboo Patel, founder and president of the Interfaith Youth Core and our third speaker in the Religious Identity dialogue event, calls for an ethic that includes "respect for different identities, relationships between diverse communities and a commitment to the common good." In his just-published book, "Out of Many Faiths: Religious Diversity and the American Promise," he tells the story of when he was in junior high and very self-conscious of his minority status. When his grandmother from India attended one of his junior high functions "at my largely white suburban school, dressed in her Indian clothes and speaking with her Indian accent, I quaked with embarrassment."

One of his teachers, sensing his situation, told him that his grandmother reminded her of her Italian grandmother. She continued, "Outside of native peoples, we all come from somewhere, and we should take pride in our heritage and customs of our family." Patel recounts how this made him feel more fully American.

We all bring different stories and experiences, and they change us. Our identities are enhanced and strengthened when we relate deeply to others and accept each other as we work for the common good.

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### IF YOU GO

#### Jewish-Christian-Muslim Dialogue

"Religious Identity: Dividing or Uniting?"

**When:** Nov. 14 and 15

**More information and free registration:**  
[interfaithunderstanding.org](http://interfaithunderstanding.org)