

INTERFAITH INSIGHT

Seeing God as greater than one's experience



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"Witnessing to my faith means sharing my experiences as honestly as possible while being equally open to listening deeply to the witness of others. ... But the refrain, for me as a Christian, is simply this — God is greater than my experience."

These are the words of Jennifer Howe Peace, the first associate professor of Interfaith Studies at Andover Newton Theological School, in her chapter titled "God is Greater" from the book she co-edited, "My Neighbor's Faith: Stories of Interreligious Encounter, Growth and Transformation." She is also a co-director of the Center for Interreligious and Communal Leadership Education (CIRCLE), a joint program between Andover Newton and the Rabbinical School at Hebrew College. Also serving as co-directors are Celene Ibrahim, Muslim chaplain at Tufts University, and Rabbi Or Rose, professor at Hebrew College.

She describes a discussion with a classmate while they were students at the School of Oriental and African Studies in London. During her junior year abroad studying the history, religion, politics and music of India, she met the Muslim classmate, named Mohammed, who "would change my theology and expand my understanding of God." Peace is the daughter of a Christian minister and spent her "first five years in South Africa as a missionary kid." But as she writes about her college experience, she admits that her childhood faith was no longer as real for her: "the words had become empty. At the same time, it struck me that faith cannot be inherited or bequeathed. It has to be chosen."

During this time in London of choosing to study Sufi poetry and the religions of India, she accepted an invitation to attend a charismatic weekend youth retreat. In the midst of her skeptical observations of the emotional expressions of those around her, she experienced a break in her resistance and began to cry. As she tells it, "Different from regular crying where the tears start from just behind the eyes, this was more like overflowing. It was as if there had been a wall holding back the water, and once it came down, water filled me up and spilled out."

She describes the first wave of painful awareness of her own faults and weaknesses, as well as a "more existential experience of collective suffering that was hard to bear." The second wave brought joy as she recognized the value of her own particular life, the reality of her being loved, and the joy that she could bring to others.

The next day in the school coffee shop, she described to Mohammed her new experience of being a "born again" Christian; he nodded, listening quietly. She was unsure how he would respond to her recounting this very emotional experience. He finally said, "I have a very good friend who described almost the exact same experience. He cried for three days, and now he is devoted to Allah."

Peace was upset since this was not at all what she expected. She denied that it was the same thing. As she writes, "The deepest moment in my own faith journey suddenly felt mundane or somehow diminished. Mohammed remained seated, as I stormed out of the coffee shop."

She reflected on this conversation that ended their friendship and writes, "I was simply unprepared and unequipped to understand my experience in the context of another faith claim." Many years later, reflecting on Mohammed's words, she is now grateful. "They planted a seed that taught me, whether I liked it or not, that my personal experiences did not give me full knowledge or exclusive rights to God. God is greater than my experience. ... At a moment when my religious identity could have been narrowly defined in Christian terms, it was broken open by Mohammed's



The co-directors of the Center for Interreligious and Communal Leadership Education are, from left, Celene Ibrahim, Muslim chaplain at Tufts University; Jennifer Howe Peace, professor at Andover Newton; and, Rabbi Or Rose, professor at Hebrew College.
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Jewish-Christian-Muslim Dialogue

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story."

In a much earlier publication she shared a brief version of her spiritual autobiography, telling about her life as a pilgrimage seeking to answer the question, "Where am I going?" She organized her reflections around Jesus' response to the question of which is the greatest commandment. Jesus replied, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength." The second is this, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." (Mark 12:30-31)

For Peace, her self-described "Mind Pilgrimage" began in college when, as she puts it, "I fell in love with knowledge." As she began to question her own motives for pursuing knowledge, she confronted the way in which knowledge is power. Knowledge "tends to divide those who know from those who don't. Power tends to separate those above from those below." She concludes that knowledge of God leads to love, which "connects us, restores us and gives hope."

She also writes about her "Heart Pilgrimage" (falling in love and her marriage) and her "Strength Pilgrimage" (recognizing the importance of a healthy body). In her "Soul Pilgrimage" she recounted her experience in London described in her later reflections on Mohammed, and her conclusion that "God is greater than my experience." Her brief spiritual autobiography concludes with, "My hope is that I can balance and serve the demands of my heart, soul, mind and body so that I might continue to learn what it means to love God and to love my neighbor as myself."

Peace has continued her study and now is a seminary professor and leader in the larger interfaith movement. She concludes her recent chapter with this: "Christianity continues to be my spiritual home. ... For me, witnessing to my faith means sharing my experiences as honestly as possible while being equally open to listening deeply to the witness of others. The insights differ. I don't believe that all religions are fundamentally the same. ... But the refrain, for me as a Christian, is simply this — God is greater than my experience. God is greater than any of our experiences."

We are very pleased that Peace will be joining Eboo Patel and Rabbi Elliot Cosgrove for our triennial Jewish-Christian-Muslim Dialogue on "Religious Identity" in November. It should prove to be a stimulating experience for us all.

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