

INTERFAITH INSIGHT

We hope for a future with equity for all

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NOTE: This week's Insight is taken from reflections presented at last week's 20th annual Interfaith Thanksgiving Celebration at the Cathedral of St. Andrew. Ghazala Munir was an early leader in the interfaith discussions and a featured speaker at the first Interfaith Thanksgiving event in 2000.



Ghazala Munir speaks at the Interfaith Thanksgiving Celebration held Nov. 25 at the Cathedral of St. Andrew in Grand Rapids. Submitted photo



The audience fills the pews at the 20th annual Interfaith Thanksgiving Celebration held Nov. 25 at the Cathedral of St. Andrew. Submitted photo

I greet you with a prayer from the Holy Quran:

"In the name of God, the Most Gracious, the Dispenser of Grace. Guide us to the straight path — the path of those upon whom you have bestowed your blessings!"

The God we all know and relate to by different names has indeed led us to the straight path, as we gather here today, to give thanks, to be grateful for this interfaith family, for the deep connections we have nurtured and the acceptance we have manifested.

This is an emotional time for me personally, because I started my life in a strange land, away from what I now call home, four decades ago. My soul was a stranger to the nature of things it was not accustomed to. I felt lost and forsaken and wanted to find comfort in familiarity. I wanted to find perfection in my new life.

But I realized that the journey to perfection means rising above limitations. Breaking ground with new traditions and customs while maintaining my own. That kind of perfection requires one to rise higher because the higher we rise, the wider becomes the horizon of our view.

Today, the demographics of our country, our world are changing with phenomenal speed. We must rise above the limitations of our vision. Here, in this space, we have opened our hearts and minds to all of God's creation; we have risen above our limitations.

My personal experiences over many years are proof that interfaith conversations are a stepping stone to our togetherness in the fractured world we live in. The Grand Rapids community has embarked on a journey to intensify our efforts to think deeply about what we can change to make our world better and connected.

I can say with great pride that interfaith associations have benefited our community tremendously. From the Interfaith Dialogue

Association to the Kaufman Interfaith Institute, we have come a long way.

Even before the Interfaith Dialogue Association was created, I was called to attend a meeting by a friend who couldn't be available for an evening gathering. Not fully aware of what I was in for, I agreed, however reluctantly. I felt a bit uneasy knowing there would be Christian and Jewish clergy and scholars of religion present. Where would I fit in this mix? What do I have to offer? But I knew instantly that this was a calling from the universe itself. That the creator herself had organized this space for me, where I could learn from other faiths while deeply studying my own. And study it with the power of intellect that God had bestowed upon me, and upon all humankind.

My own personal inquiry affirmed what I had always believed: that the God we all worship is the God of justice, the God of compassion, the God of mercy! Above all, our creator is genderless and doesn't hold one sex superior over another. Human beings are created equal!

Being called to be part of this group of highly accomplished and curious people meant that I was being given a platform to explore and learn about the many facets of religions I had always struggled with: the gender issues facing all faiths in all societies. My heart was always torn by the divisions imposed upon us by many of our faith leaders (but not all), be they imams, pastors, priests or rabbis and the rest.

We cannot deny that there have always been divisions among religions. Wars have been fought over religion and battles won and lost. These divisions are sustained when its leaders and their adherents claim that their religion represents the "true faith," and either you are with us or you are not.

Then there are divisions within one religion, again led by the hierarchies of power. It's obvious that those who manifest power can easily impose such divisions. We are talking of three kinds of divisions: interfaith,

intra-faith and patriarchal.

Patriarchal supremacy has reigned supreme since generations past. It's sad but true that it still marches on triumphantly in our houses of worship and our everyday lives. I know very well that I will find resistance when I say this — but I will say it anyhow.

Women all over the world are still struggling as they ask for their status for equality. We are still tied down by convention and religious authority. We are kept in this prison without obvious walls, but walls do exist, and to break free of them needs a certain solidarity among women of all faiths all over the world.

I know there will be justifications of all sorts, but I am so used to speaking my mind and knowing that I only answer to my God, not to those who stand in my way. I grew up knowing that the walls of this prison have to be demolished for myself and other women like me. But you all know that seeking freedom from bondage and tradition doesn't come without a price. Believe me when I say that I have paid the price to be who I am, where I am.

Every day is a challenge as this struggle continues. Needless to say, it's a lonely battle, at times. Simply, because when we question religious authority of organized religion, we become an instant threat. An instant threat to power — powers that control the minds of men and women alike. What sustains me again is the truth that the God of justice will be my guide and yours, too.

Whether we like to admit it or not, this state of affairs has existed in all ages. Blinded by conventions, abiding by the

laws of the times and the customs of the people, man has ignored and opposed the truth.

History sets the context for the present. We cannot relive or undo the past, but what we can alter is the future. The present is in our hands, and I hope that the generations to follow will know of their past as a proud moment in time.

How we live our lives today will shape the future. It has to be a joint effort by both genders, and it starts within the boundaries of our homes as we raise our children to have a deep respect for all humanity.

Thanksgiving events are a good time to celebrate the fact that the interfaith movement has done much to eliminate this kind of divisive opinion, and to open up people's hearts and minds to the truth and goodness within each religion, as well as within all of the world's wisdom traditions.

Hopefully, interfaith activism has made us free from this prison of delusions, which makes us feel superior to the other, whether it is gender, race or religion.

I have hope in our young people who will carry the torch forward as we step down from this stage of life, where we have all played a role. I use the train as a metaphor for life. As some of us get off at a specified time and station, our journey ends, but others carry on to their destinations. On this journey forward, we hope that our youth will make this world an all-inclusive place, where humanity prevails, kindness persists and love endures. It's a big endeavor, a huge job, but the other option will be a calamity of civilizations.

As we step off at our predestined station, I hope and pray that our creator and nourisher can give us a lasting peace, knowing that the torch has been passed!