

# Character and . . .

## Courageous Compassion

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*The faculty essays presented here emerge from a semester-long process of reading and writing together in an environment of critique and review. Nevertheless, this invited journal of essays represents the authors' views and not necessarily the views of the Wendt Center for Character Education or the University of Dubuque.*

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# Courageous Compassion and Interfaith Friendship

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*Bonnie Sue Lewis*

## **Abstract**

*Interfaith friendship is key to breaking down barriers of hostility and distrust between Jews, Muslims, and Christians. This calls for courageous compassion and creation of “sacred spaces” to welcome others into our lives. Practicing hospitality and an openness to the Other is not only fundamental to all three faith traditions, but enabled only through the God who first welcomed us and by whose grace and mercy we draw strength to love and serve one another. Interfaith friendships begin with making room for God.*

## **The Invitation**

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I was to teach a seminary class on Christianity and Islam and knew so little of the latter. A friend had introduced me to the local imam, Dr. Adib Kassas, a Syrian psychiatrist in town, so I gave him a call. Could my friend and I have coffee with him some afternoon this week to talk about lecturing in my class? He laughed. “I’d be glad to, but it will have to be after dark,” he said. “It’s the last week of Ramadan.” I was embarrassed. I had made the first of many religious faux pas: I had not even realized that this was, indeed, the height of one of the most revered Muslim holy days, and one of the Five Pillars of Islam. Fortunately, Adib took my ignorance in stride and simply invited me and my friends to dinner

with the Muslim community of Dubuque on Saturday, for Eid al-Fitr, the festival celebrating the end of the month-long fast of Ramadan.

Thus, on that Saturday, September 11, 2010, nine years to the day after the Twin Towers fell, when a fanatic Baptist preacher was burning Qur'ans in Florida, and to the consternation of my family members who knew only of TV images of rampaging Muslim fanatics, I headed out to a Muslim home in rural Illinois.

Welcomed by our host, a retired Syrian engineer and his family, my friends and I feasted on dates, nuts, palak gosht, other succulent if unidentifiable dishes, and conversation with Muslims from around the world living in the Tri-state area. So began an incredible journey of discovery and shared companionship across religious and cultural boundaries, a journey that spawned a new community of Christian, Muslim and Jewish families engaged in dialogue, hospitality and friendship: the *Children of Abraham*.



*Peace Rally: "Jews, Muslims, and Christians belong together!"*

## **The Call to Courageous Compassion**

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Courageous compassion? Perhaps. If it is courageous to call the effort to understand and appreciate differences, a willingness to experience some awkward encounters of cultural disorientation and even misunderstanding, and create space in one's life for others to feel welcome. But compassion it certainly is: the Children of Abraham community that came out of these early bungling attempts to get to know one another has been truly marked by the desire on every side to extend the hand of fellowship and to seek understanding through the gifts of

hospitality and friendship. Jews, Christians, and Muslims share a common understanding that it is a merciful and compassionate God who calls us to reach out to others in hospitality and friendship. A response of courageous compassion—even in the face of fear or harm—is what creates a sacred space where not only is hospitality practiced, but God is glorified.

Today religion, or religious fanaticism, is frequently blamed for the hostility and violence that have shaken the world. News accounts are rife with images and reports of shootings, destruction, and mayhem created by fundamentalists of every stripe, raising valid questions of whether religion is guilty of causing more harm than good. As a professor of religion, Stephen Prothero notes, “Unfortunately, we live in a world where religion seems as likely to detonate a bomb as to defuse one” (7).

Regardless of how we view religious differences, the Abrahamic faiths hold in common the belief in a God who chooses relationship with the created and who calls us into relationships with others. It is difficult to be in relationship with those one

knows nothing about. To that end, founder and president of Chicago-based Interfaith Youth Corps, Eboo Patel, calls for “interfaith literacy.”

He claims that we must all learn “an appreciative knowledge” of other faith



*Muslims, Christians, and Jews at Temple Beth El* traditions that includes finding admirable traits in every faith and shared values, and then building upon the historical efforts of interfaith cooperation to disarm the tribalism and tensions between religious communities (95-96).

The time seems ripe for reclaiming what all the Abrahamic faiths (Judaism, Christianity, and Islam) espouse in some form: love of God and extending compassion toward one’s neighbor. The 2007

open letter to Christians, “A Common Word Between Us and You,” written by Jordanian H.R.H. Prince Ghazi bin Muhammad and signed by 138 leading Muslim clerics and scholars, was a call for those of all three faiths to come together. As he claimed, “. . . whilst there is no minimizing some of their formal differences—it is clear that the ‘Two Greatest Commandments’ are an area of common ground and a link between the Qur’an, the Torah and the New Testament,” loving God and neighbor (bin Muhammad 45).

A month after the publication of the open letter, a collaboration of Christians replied in what has come to be known as the Yale Response with 130 signatories. In it, Christians applauded the courage of the Muslim community that issued the Common Word document, and affirmed that love of God and neighbor was central to both faith communities, notwithstanding “undeniable differences” (Volf et al. 53). Christians know that when asked to name the greatest commandment, Jesus responded: “‘You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.’ This is the greatest and first commandment. And the second is like it: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets” (NRSV, Matt. 22.37-40). And the order is important; loving God enables loving the neighbor. Making room for God allows one to make room for others. Friendship with God enables compassionate friendship with all those God loves.

While we do not all conceive of God in the same ways nor practice our faiths in the same manner, we can begin to learn about, gain understanding of, and show compassion toward the Other, because at root in all three faiths is a God who calls us to devote ourselves to him and to care for others.

## The Practice of Hospitality

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In his book *Reaching Out*, Catholic priest and theologian Henri Nouwen defines hospitality as “primarily the creation of a free space where the stranger can enter and become a friend instead of an enemy” (51). The Children of Abraham was founded to encourage just such opportunities. Recognizing how little we knew of one another, several of us began in that fall of 2010 to seek times and places to get to know one another better. John Eby, a professor of history at Loras College, who first introduced me to Adib Kassas, had begun informal conversations with the imam and with Jewish professor of computer graphics at the University of Dubuque, Alan Garfield. John’s vision for taking these conversations to the public was the genesis of the movement. I climbed aboard with another Loras professor, John Waldmeir, and we launched the first of what has become monthly interfaith conversations around designated topics common to all of us.



*Children of Abraham Panel at Clarke College Chapel*

These gatherings attract on average 75-80 people across the religious spectrum of Dubuque and provide space for a member of each of the three Abrahamic faiths to speak briefly on the chosen subject (creation, Abraham, Noah, holy books, humor, etc.). We then open the

discussion to table conversations and fellowship. All who speak do so as practitioners of their faith and from their own faith experience. They do not speak for their entire faith tradition nor as authorities of that tradition. However, they do speak freely and openly of their faith commitments, realizing that those who participate in a dialogue must come to the table with something

they believe in, something to offer, as well as an openness to the offerings of others. We do not seek a “single common denominator” in our faiths, but acknowledge that there are common threads running through each of the Abrahamic faiths, as well as profound differences. We want to learn more about each other and together discover not only the threads that bind us but also our differences, around which true dialogue can take place. We attempt to live out the idea that, as theologian David Bosch has noted, “true dialogue presupposes commitment” to a particular conviction. It also presupposes that God is already there inviting us into relationships with himself and each other, and none of us has God in our pocket (484).

Conceived from the beginning as an opportunity to offer hospitality, Children of Abraham

meetings are held at various locations around town, primarily in houses of worship. We found that meeting in sacred places, places where we ourselves welcome and are welcomed by the Holy One, best allows for the intent of creating spaces to welcome the Other. It encourages us to open



*Muslim Dalia Rahim at Temple Beth El*

our hearts to one another and provides avenues toward cultivating friendship. Along those lines, in 2014 the Children of Abraham began to offer what we called “Festival Hospitality.” Each faith community chose a particular holy day to share with the community and the other two faith communities helped provide a meal afterward. At the Jewish Temple Beth El, in 2014 and 2015, we all participated in building a *sukkah*, the temporary shelter to commemorate the Exodus, for Sukkot, the Feast of the Tabernacle. Their community had grown so small that it had been nearly a generation since the synagogue had been able to construct a *sukkah* and we all rejoiced to be able to return this tradition to their community. Later in the fall of those years, we





*Jews, Christians, and Muslims build Sukkot*

celebrated the 10<sup>th</sup> of Muharram at the Tri-State Islamic Center, a day of atonement (and fasting) that commemorates the Exodus during which Moses led his people out of Egypt. It provided an opportunity to learn of the importance to the

Muslim community of submission to God through fasting. In the spring of 2015 we held a Lenten service in preparation for Easter at Westminster Presbyterian Church and the following year it was hosted by St. Elias Greek Orthodox Church. This event allowed us to share insight into the significance of the death and resurrection of Jesus to Christians. Each of these “festivals,” as we have continued the practice, give us the chance to get to know one another better, to appreciate our varying faith commitments more fully, to foster deeper conversation, and to be both hosts and guests for the others.

Children of Abraham members further extend hospitality through study of our sacred texts, because “each tradition’s scripture is at the heart of its identity” (Ford 345). We do this through scheduling three of our monthly meetings each year to include study of a particular text chosen from the Qur’an, the Tanakh (the entire Hebrew Bible that includes the five books of the Pentateuch or Torah, the Prophets, and the Writings), or the Christian Bible. Following an explanation or interpretation of the text presented by a member of the community whose text we are studying, panelists of other faiths respond with insights, questions, or comments, and finally discussion opens up to the whole group. These monthly meetings reach a wider audience, but small groups meet for weekly interfaith Qur’an study and Bible study. Inviting others into a study of beloved texts makes

space for deepening relationships of trust and respect, even as greater understanding is gained into what undergirds and inspires the faith of the other. According to those who engage in the practice of studying sacred scriptures with members of the three Abrahamic faiths, “friendship is the true ground of scriptural reasoning” (Ford 350). In our five years of studying sacred texts together we could affirm that conclusion. We also found it true that “participants in scriptural reasoning all find themselves invited, not by each other, but by an agency that is not theirs to command or shape. There is an ‘other’ to the three traditions, and that seems in an obscure way to make friendships possible” (Ford 351). Yes, God seems to show up in these encounters as we wrestle with both the merciful and the more difficult passages of our texts.



*Daughters of Abraham Lunch*

In between these more formal occasions, wider friendships are blossoming. We women began gathering for monthly lunches more than a year ago and these now include regularly scheduled evenings spent in one another’s homes.

These are places where women can literally “let down their hair,” take off the hijab, and laugh and cry and pass around the babies to cuddle. For most of us, our circle of friends who eat together, play together, see movies or even babysit for each other now include dear friends of faiths other than our own. We have dubbed ourselves the Daughters of Abraham, and, indeed, we enjoy a sisterhood that has enriched each of us.

Occasionally the Children of Abraham community holds a special event, such as when we brought in comedian Azhar Usman in the spring of 2015 and 2016, or the special showing of the film *Jerusalem 3D* at the local River Museum in the fall of the same year. In January 2016, the Children of Abraham hosted “The Songs

of the Soul: An Interfaith Celebration of Chant” in the Dominican chapel at Sinsinawa Mound, Wisconsin. It was a delightful afternoon of shared music, worship and conversation. We have gathered together to march against violence in the community and the nation, and regularly provide meals for the Circles Initiative in Dubuque, a community-based organization for people in need. All of these events and activities offer the larger community the chance to build interfaith relationships across multiple boundaries, to open their hearts and minds to those who would otherwise be strangers in a time of increased violence and vitriolic rhetoric. As Nouwen claims, “To convert hostility into hospitality requires the creation of the friendly empty space where we can reach out to our fellow human beings and invite them to a new relationship” (54). It may even mean that we “readjust our identities to make space for them” (Volf 29). To our amazement, as word has spread, more and more people of Dubuque have joined our ranks. Our November 2015 gathering around the topic “Purpose of Life” crowded nearly 200 people into the synagogue!

## **Courageous Compassion: Womb Love**

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Compassion is “a virtue willfully extended toward friends and strangers,” according to ethicist Diana Cates (2). Cates reminds us that it is “a habitual disposition” that we choose to feel and act upon toward others, particularly those who are hurt or suffering. It is “a sort of reasoning,” according to philosopher Martha Nussbaum (28). Extending compassion can be an unexpected compulsion or “gut reaction,” but it is also a choice. To an extent, one can easily sympathize with or take pity on one who is in need, because we know what it is to be needy. We have often walked in those shoes, known sorrow or sickness, fallen upon hard times, been ridiculed, abused or cheated. We know what it is to despair, to be broken, to be rejected. Such pain opens us to the pain of others. Too much of it, though, can create “compassion fatigue,”

overwhelming us and making us shrink from acts of mercy or even caring. And compassion can fail completely when one becomes the victim of violence or hatred. This is when we most need help in the call to compassion (Cates 183).

The word “compassion” in Hebrew bears the same root as the word “womb.” Therefore, it is not a stretch to claim that compassion is “seeing another person as a sibling born from the same womb” (Williams 21). As siblings we belong, friend or stranger, to one another. As siblings we share a common parent, the God who will not forget us, because he has “inscribed us on the palm of his hands” (Isa. 49.15, 16); we are precious in



*Children of Abraham Board Meeting*

God’s sight and he loves all whom he has created. Muslim professor of Islamic Studies, Seyyed Hossein Nasr, at George Washington University, writes, “To live fully as a Muslim or Christian does not require anything less of us than loving the neighbor, whether he or she be Muslim or Christian, and it requires us not to ask, ‘Is he or she one of us?’ but to recognize that “He or she is one of His,” (Volf et al. 117). This is “womb-love.” Only the source of all love and compassion, who is God, however, can enable us to extend God’s love to others, especially when we find it difficult to do so. As we experience the love of God we are able to love others because God’s love lives in us, according to 1 John 4. Furthermore, “Those who say, ‘I love God,’ and hate their brothers or sisters, are liars; for those who do not love a brother or sister whom they have seen, cannot love God whom they have not seen.”

As a Christian, I believe that this love is manifested in Jesus, God's beloved son, who came that we might know how deep and everlasting is God's love. As the first chapter of John makes clear, "No one has ever seen God. It is God the only Son, who is close to the Father's heart, who has made him known" (John 1.18). Christ Jesus came in the flesh to bear witness to the one he called Father. He did so by "moving into the neighborhood" (Peterson, John 1.14). Thus, Jesus not only testified to God's love, but showed us how to live: by dwelling among, participating with and extending mercy toward all. It is the incarnation of Christ that reveals most fully the height, depth and breadth of God's love, but as all are made in the image of God, there is in each of us something of the divine image that reflects the loving nature of God. As Volf claims, "Love of neighbors is not the condition of God's presence in us; God's presence in us is the condition of love of neighbors" (Volf et al. 140). This we draw upon to welcome, to make room for the Other, especially when we find it most difficult to love. Indeed, the act of compassion, according to Cates, is the act of "being a friend" and people are "befrienable" because they have been befriended by God (234). This truth enables us to love others, as Christ did, sometimes even to our hurt.

## **Loving when it Hurts**

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I left the Qur'an study one evening frustrated, a bit angry and definitely hurt. Our discussions are often lively, intense, and, even inspiring at times. But this particular evening had bordered more on the intense. Around the table we were discussing the question raised by the passage, is Jesus a "sign" that points to God, and if so, what does that mean? As could be expected, the topic prompted some lively debate. The many references to Jesus in the Qur'an had prompted other conversations around the similarities and differences we hold concerning him. However, this time our passions and persuasions got the better of us. As we became defensive, we were less articulate and more strident in trying to

make our particular point. Not one to usually make waves, I found myself trying to outshout the primarily male-dominated conversation. It was not pretty. I finally embarrassed myself by threatening to leave if the testosterone level in the room did not subside a bit. Flustered, we all calmed down and the meeting broke up shortly thereafter. I came away glad that I knew we were friends enough not to let our strong passions drive a wedge between us, but I admit to feeling that I had not been heard.

The next evening I received a call from Adib. He asked my forgiveness. He held himself responsible for letting the discussion get out of hand. He felt he had let me down by failing to listen to my point of view. He valued my friendship and feared it had been jeopardized. I was humbled. I realized what it took for a man of his stature in the community to apologize, convinced as he was that his position was in the right. My anger and hurt vanished as I assured him that our friendship did not rest on simply his response to me, but on God's call to love one another—regardless! I was touched by his courageous compassion and we were both moved toward greater regard for one another.

## Conclusion

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*Jewish Leader Alan Garfield and Imam Adib Kassas*

As the Children of Abraham in Dubuque wraps up its fifth year, and prepares for the sixth, we have learned a few things about interfaith relationships. But it is a story still being written.

We are yet finding our way to what it really means to be friends. As we have opened ourselves, our homes and our sacred spaces to one another, we have learned that “[o]ffering and receiving friendship breaks down the barriers of ‘us’ and ‘them’ and opens up possibilities of

healing and reconciliation” (Heuertz and Pohl 30). Loving others is not an option, it is a command of God. This we all believe and thus are committed to meeting regularly, over the long-haul, and especially when we sense misunderstanding among us. Joining together in meals, movies, family celebrations, and service projects, or simply dropping by for coffee, we have found that disagreements are not allowed to fester, misunderstandings are not allowed to divide us. We seek to model for the community the peace and love our faiths demand and are blessed beyond measure by the joy of finding we are part of a very large and sometimes unruly family.

We have also learned that loving others is only possible because of, and through, God’s love for us. This means nurturing our own relationships with God is crucial. The largeness and graciousness of God opens a space within us to invite others in. Apart from God’s love for us, we are incapable of loving others. I do not fail to pray that my Muslim and Jewish friends would come to know Jesus as I do. I know that my Jewish friends pray that we Christians and Muslims would not take ourselves and what we believe so seriously, and simply join with them in healing the world. I know that my Muslim friends pray we Christians and Jews would submit fully to God and revere the Prophet Muhammad. What matters more to me than *what* they pray for me, is that they care enough *to* pray for me. Because praying enlarges the heart, gives courage to love, and pleases God.

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