



Auckland Unitarian Church
Love beyond belief

Building Bridges: Interfaith Connections from a Unitarian perspective

Sally Mabelle © 27 September 2020

For the past couple of years, I've been involved with the [West Auckland Women's Interfaith initiative](#)... this began in the wake of the Christchurch Mosque shootings as a way to break down the barriers of fear between People of different faiths, to form interfaith friendships, where we could realise our essential unity as a human family, despite our differences of belief, ritual, and culture. Visiting some of the women in their various congregations, and I had some surprising adventures.

As I grew up in the Anglican faith (or Episcopal as we call it in the US), I decided I'd revisit the old tradition of my childhood. I attended [St. Michael and All Angels church in Henderson](#). Thinking I'd be in for a formal, slightly boring service, I was surprised when I was greeted by the Vicar, Rev. Dr. Nyasha Gombeze, from Zimbabwe, giving me a big hug and asking me and the rest of the congregation to 'dance like we're dancing for God' and to 'sing like we're singing for God'... grooving and moving to the rock band up front with some of the upbeat opening worship songs. During her sermon, she was speaking the interfaith message of loving and being open to all people of all different faiths and habits... 'if you come to my house, you'd meet my Muslim friend, my Hindu friend, my Gay friend, my alcoholic smoker friend (although he'd be outside on the porch)... it is not our job to judge others... that's God's... it's our job to love others.'... Wow, this was not the Anglican service I expected.

She had invited me to lead a Christian and Jewish dance of universal peace at an upcoming fundraising event, and so at the Sunday morning service I attended, she caught me by surprise when she was making announcements... 'Sally, come on up here...' She put her arm around my shoulders and said, 'Now, this lady is going to come and lead us in some peace dances at our fundraiser' – I guess I was cornered. I felt a real sense of warmth, welcome, and love. Later, at the fundraiser, I met a wonderful violinist who was bubbling about the dances and saying how she would love to play violin, especially for Jewish dances. 'Great', I said... maybe you'd like to accompany me at the dances we're planning on starting here next month. 'Oh, yes, she said, 'I'll give you my details, and we'll get together and have a play.' Just as I was feeling all excited and hopeful about my new interfaith connections, I said, 'and we also do dances from all different faiths... Hindu, Buddhist, Sufi, etc... Suddenly, her face dropped... and she leaned away slightly... the entire mood shifted dramatically, 'Oh' she said, 'well then I can't play for you... I'm a Christian'... I felt stunned... and sad, and a bit annoyed.

Fortunately, not everyone is so rigidly confined to their religious silos... For instance, I met a woman who told me she went to the C3 megachurch, and I automatically thought she must also be a fundamentalist. Talking to her further, I found out she was headed to a week long

Buddhist meditation retreat and also did Sufi practices. I find it's helpful to remember that we are not the only ones who pride ourselves on being tolerant and open-minded.

A trio of Imam Jahmal Rahman, Pastor Don Mackenzie, and Rabbi Ted Falcon call themselves the three interfaith amigos in their Ted Talk at the University of Denver. They relate a well-known story... The Holy Spirit comes down and reveals certain basic truths to some people but then the Devil comes along and says "Let me organise that for you" and that sometimes is called religion. They continue by saying that interfaith is not about conversion – it's about completion – becoming a fully human being – from this place of inner spaciousness, we can collaborate on projects which are dear to all of our hearts – issues of social justice and earthcare.

What is the phrase which appears on our website and encapsulates our freethinking faith?... That phrase which describes our highest ideal is:

Love Beyond Belief

... and here at Auckland Unitarian Church, we believe that everyone is worthy of love and respect and FREE to seek truth in freedom – to create their highest ideals and their own vision about the meaning and purpose of Life...

We don't have to believe alike to love alike

What does our big orange banner which hangs on our back wall of our church and which we carry in parades say?...

Standing on the Side of Love

Every person has different triggers for that feeling of love, reverence, awe, and wonder, the very source of their deepest yearning, their very life. Here, we affirm our interdependence as we are each an undivided portion of an 'interconnected web of all existence'. We call in the 'Spirit of Life' each week as we ask it to 'sing in our hearts all the stirrings of compassion' and we affirm our covenant with each other and with our God.

I have learned to connect with people of different faiths by speaking in terms of their language for their highest ideal, to speak in their 'God language'. The greatest differences in the various religions are around thought and ritual: stories, histories, myths, creeds, and doctrines. However, the core ethics are very similar among religions. For instance, there are similarities in relationship to the ideals of respect, forgiveness, charity, social justice, and love. Human beings all have in common the need to relate to something 'greater than the self'. Religion answers the common human questions, 'What is the purpose of life?' and 'How should I live my life?' However, we humans don't always live up to our ideals... and that's why religions go awry. Thomas Jefferson, in arguing for religious toleration in the colony of Virginia said, 'it does me no harm for my neighbour to say there are 20 gods or no God.'

Can we stretch to affirm and recognise the essential unity of all people? Can we stretch ourselves and reach out more actively to embrace the rich abundance of cultural variety? Can we view the various faith groups as different colours in a rich multi-cultural tapestry?

According to the creator of the original star trek TV series:-

“If we are to survive, we will have learned to take a delight in the essential differences between people and between cultures. We will learn that differences in ideas and attitudes are a delight, part of life’s exciting variety, not something to fear.”

GENE RODDENBERRY

‘All religions have the potential to create better human beings – but no religion can claim supremacy over the other.’

DALAI LAMA

The first person to bring Sufism to the West, relates a story of how he embraced all traditions:-

“Once I was travelling from England to the United States, and on the ship on Sunday there was a Protestant service, which I attended; and everyone thought I was a Protestant. Then there was a Catholic service and when I went to the Catholic service, people began to look at me, doubting if I was a Catholic or a Protestant. After that, there was a Jewish service and when I went, they began to think that, if I was a Rabbi, why did I go to all these services? To me every one of these services was an expression of devotion, for me they were not different. The form makes no difference, it is our feeling. When our feeling is right, if we are in the church or on the market-place or in the simple nature or in our own house, we always will express our sincere devotion. Therefore, the Sufi’s form of prayer is all forms of prayer and in every form he feels that exaltation which is the principal thing to experience in religious life. ”

HAZRAT INAYAT KHAN

John F Kennedy, in his commencement address at American University in 1963 said,

“Tolerance only for those who agree with you is no tolerance at all. If we cannot end now our differences, at least we can help make the world safe for diversity. For, in the final analysis, our most basic common link is that we all inhabit this small planet. We all breathe the same air. We all cherish our children’s future. And we are all mortal.”

JOHN F KENNEDY

As it’s the holiest day of the year in the Jewish tradition, Yom Kippur, or the day of At-ONE-ment, I’ll close with a little known story from the Old Testament – After creating the world, God was talking to one of his angels. He said, “I just figured out how to rotate the earth so it creates an incredible 24-hour period of light and darkness – The angel said, ‘What are you going to do now?’ and God says ‘I think I’ll call it a day.’

Amen!

Discussion / Meditation

How willing are you to connect with people of different faiths, beliefs & cultures?

Do you initiate interactions, conversations, do you go out and visit their places of worship?

What more could you do to promote interfaith love, harmony, peace, and to stretch your bubble of belief into embracing all?