



Learnings From Interfaith @ Augsburg

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00 What's This All About?

Welcome.

To you who are curious -

- About other faiths
- About your own faith
- About what it can look like to dwell in that intersection of faiths

To you who are seeking -

- Stories of dialogue
- Stories of intentionality
- Stories of messiness

To you who are nervous -

- How might we start?
- How might we get stuck?
- How might we grow?

These learnings are for you.

Glean what you may.

Leave what you don't need.

Let reflection and theory shape your practice.



What follows are snippets from a conversation with former coordinators of an interfaith gathering at Augsburg University, a multi-faith institution of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America in Minneapolis, MN, that brought students, staff, and faculty together with neighbors to break bread and share experiences. [Listen to the full conversation here.](#)

Amongst stories and takeaways, you'll find examples of Interfaith events, insights and resources from practitioners, plus reflection questions to guide your own learning as you apply things to your context.

Featured Storytellers -



"I am Jewish, and mostly culturally Jewish, not particularly religiously, Jewish. And interfaith work is important to me, because... many of our identities are very much shaped by our faith or religious background or lack thereof. And I think having conversations across faith backgrounds is a great way to learn more deeply about one another, build relationships, and understand more about the world."

- Natalie (she/her)

"I come from a partly Jewish, partly Christian family, so Jewish and Christian tradition and theology and practices all have shaped me and are part of my life... I learn a lot about myself and about the divine through different faith traditions and practices, so I'm just personally really enriched by interfaith work. And, also, I see that learning as part of equipping me to be in right relationship in religiously diverse communities."

- Rachel (she/her)



Section 01

Igniting Curiosity

01 | The Story Of Interfaith @ Augsburg

“I would describe interfaith at Augsburg as, or at Cedar Commons, as it was sometimes called as a place-based or neighborhood-based gathering of people who lived, worked studied, were connected in some way to Cedar-Riverside, the neighborhood where it took place or takes place, and of people who either were people of faith or were interested in conversations about faith and spirituality coming together to learn from each other's experiences.”

I think the story starts with an interfaith Iftar, which is a breaking of the fast meal at the end of the day of fasting during the holy month of Ramadan for Muslims. And somehow there came about the idea of Trinity Lutheran Church, whose basement these gatherings took place in originally, partnering with one of the mosques in the neighborhood, Dar al Hijra, for an interfaith Iftar where mostly people could build relationships and where non Muslims could learn a little bit about Iftars, and Ramadan, and Islam. And so that was a collaborative event that took place. A lot of people came. And it was such a rich experience for many people who attended that there was all of this like, ‘Wow, we should do this again!’ And then we did do it again!

So there's...a second interfaith Iftar, and then after that one, there was also all of this energy and excitement around the kinds of conversations that were happening and the kinds of relationship building that was taking place. There was just some energy around exploring what it would look like to have these kinds of conversations, not just around an Iftar or during Ramadan, but in an ongoing way. So as my role at that time, which was kind of like a convener, bringing people together to make things happen around common aspirations or common goals, I pulled together a few people who were involved or who I thought might be interested, who were all connected to the neighborhood in some way, and that was a multi-faith group of people, including Baha'is and Muslims and Christians and people who are not people of faith but we're interested. And we started scheming about what an ongoing gathering could look like.

Although it started kind of revolving around specific holidays or observances...eventually it kind of morphed and evolved into broader conversations around just a huge, wide range of topics that could be of interest to anyone but kind of coming at them from our different traditions or perspectives.”

- Rachel

“We can look upon the face of anyone or anything around us and say - as a moral declaration and as a spiritual, cosmological, and biological fact: You are a part of me I do not yet know. But you don’t have to be religious in order to be open to wonder. You only have to reclaim a sliver of what you once knew as a child. If you remember how to wonder, then you already have what you need to learn how to love.”

- Valerie Kaur (2020), *See No Stranger: A Memoir and Manifesto of Revolutionary Love*, p. 11

Reflect

What is your context? How is it similar to what’s described here? How is it different?

How might you need to hold lessons from Augsburg loosely in order to apply them to your own context?

What do you wonder about as you think about interfaith dialogue in your context?

What stands out to you about Reflective Believing?

The kind of wondering and engaging that often unfolded during Interfaith @ Augsburg could cultivate what Edward Foley has described as **Reflective Believing (RB)**:

“a meaning-making practice, exercised in light of one’s individual or shared wisdom-heritage, that honors the experiences and stories of its participants. Employed for diverse purposes, it welcomes and displays a holy envy for other ways of believing, while recognizing the bond of humanity between all participants. Necessarily improvisational, it displays respect for the common good and exercises humility in knowing how to contribute to that good.”

A few of the rules for Reflective Believing:

- RB is not theistic at its core but is a language game that can be played by both theists and nontheists.
- Shared humanity is common ground for entering this game.
- There is no single method for engaging in RB.
- Like many art forms, RB requires improvisation.
- There is no single starting point for engaging in RB.
- Experiences of believing and the narrating of those experiences are common and valued elements in RB.
- RB first honors difference rather than questioning it.
- While intention is important, RB is a practice not simply an idea.
- Its performance is enhanced when its players exhibit certain characteristics or virtues, especially
 - a. respect and even awe when invited into another’s way of believing;
 - b. humility in the face of what cannot easily be explained;
 - c. courage when encountering forms of believing that challenge one’s own;
 - d. a sense of peacefulness that disallows one to move too quickly to judging; and
 - e. a holy envy that looks for beauty in other ways of believing.
- Listening is an important skill for effective RB.
- RB invites a balance between what is known with the head and through the body with deep feelings or heart knowledge.
- RB exhibits a moral sensitivity that seeks the potential for good that resides in every human heart.
- Beginners in RB ordinarily benefit greatly from a mentor or guide to lead them into this reflective path.

03 Following The Curiosity Of The Community

I think I maybe saw that a little bit less... with Augsburg students and community members... But what I did see was, with trust being built within the cohort of students, who are from a wide variety of faith backgrounds. It seems like as the year went on... the group was more or less feeling brave enough and comfortable enough to ask harder questions and more vulnerable questions and learn from each other in a deeper way.

The times when curiosity and wonder were hindered were times when people felt scared to ask those harder questions for fear of offending someone or not knowing what language to use. And so it seems like what you're saying, Rachel, about relationships being a really foundational piece, I can definitely see that, too, because it seems like that curiosity could really be activated when people felt trusting."

- Natalie

We didn't want this to be the kind of gathering or learning experience that was kind of just the same as like learning what you could learn through Wikipedia...

But rather, that relationships would be really central to it, and where we would be learning about each other's lived experiences, and how do our faith or spiritual traditions inform our day to day lives and who we are and the decisions we make and our perspectives around different issues...

And so there were real relationships building over time... I think there's a lot of natural curiosity that emerges... when I'm invested in you, and I care about you, and I'm interested in you and your story. I'm just naturally really eager and curious to understand how you see the world... I feel like I experienced a lot of wonder in those conversations."

- Rachel

Section 02

Curating Content

“Setting the expectation that people are going to speak from their own experiences and not make generalizations about an entire group of people - that was a pretty important [ground rule] that seemed to come up every time.”

- Natalie

“I do feel like that was really profound ... really asking people every single time to really speak from their own experience, be mindful of what is the scope of your experience and not speaking way beyond that, but then also making it clear that we're not expecting any person to speak for their entire tradition...”

I think both for participants, to be freed of this pressure, to speak for all Jewish people when I really can't at all, but I can tell you about my life and my experience, I think that freed up participants to... share more and share more freely.

With guests who we were inviting to share or speak and... have their sharing be central to the event, being clear with them [that] we're also not inviting you to be the supreme authority on your faith because we don't want you to claim to do that. We want you to speak from, you know, your location and your experience, and to also be upfront about that. Like, what's your relationship to this faith community or a little bit about your background and then to speak to what you can speak to.”

- Rachel

“We have collected readings that give rise to questions like these because we believe that there is great value in reflecting on the varied ways we seek to improve our world and on the equally varied commitments behind these efforts. Each of the selected readings invites reflection about service, faith, and the connections between them. Together, these readings encourage us to consider how individuals belonging to different communities and believing in distinct creeds might live and serve together in mutual trust.”

- Adam Davis (editor, 2011), *Hearing the Call Across Traditions: Readings on Faith and Service*, p. 3

Reflect

What might co-creating content look like in your context?

What makes you nervous about that?

How do the quotes and principles on this page help you think about content differently?

Who has “expertise” in your community?

10 Principles of Creating Healthy Community Change

- People support what they create
- People act responsibly when they care
- Conversation is the way human beings have always thought
- To change the conversation, change who is in it
- Expect leaders to come from anywhere
- Focusing on what is working gives us energy and creativity
- Wisdom resides within us
- Everything is a failure in the middle
- Humans can handle anything as long as we're together
- Generosity, forgiveness, love

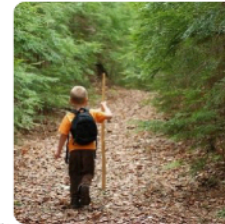
Margaret Wheatley (2007), Keynote address to the NDS Queensland Communities of Practice

03 Following The Content Of The Community

“We over time started to feel that if the topic was... a part of life that everybody is connected to or relates to, and then we're all invited to come and speak from our specific perspective or lived experience, that creates a different kind of access to the conversation for everyone in the room...


I think that probably also shifted who was interested in being a part of these gatherings, when it felt a little bit less... like, uh, ‘Oh, this is only for certain people or for really faithy people.’”

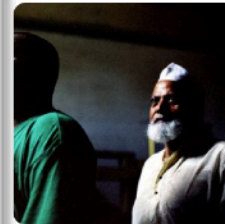
- Rachel



THU, JAN 25, 2018


Stories of Getting Lost and Finding Yourself

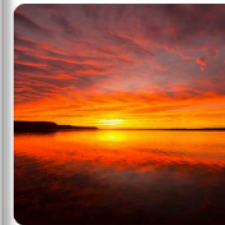
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THU, JAN 11, 2018


A Son's Sacrifice: Food, Culture, and Spirituality

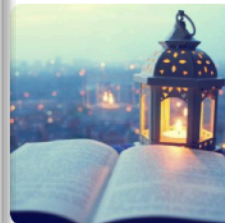
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THU, DEC 14, 2017


Intersections of Gender Identity and Spirituality

 Created by Cedar Commons



THU, JAN 26, 2017


Interfaith at Cedar Commons: The Power of Stories

 Created by Gerald Aulandez



THU, JAN 12, 2017

Interfaith at Cedar Commons: Creation Stories

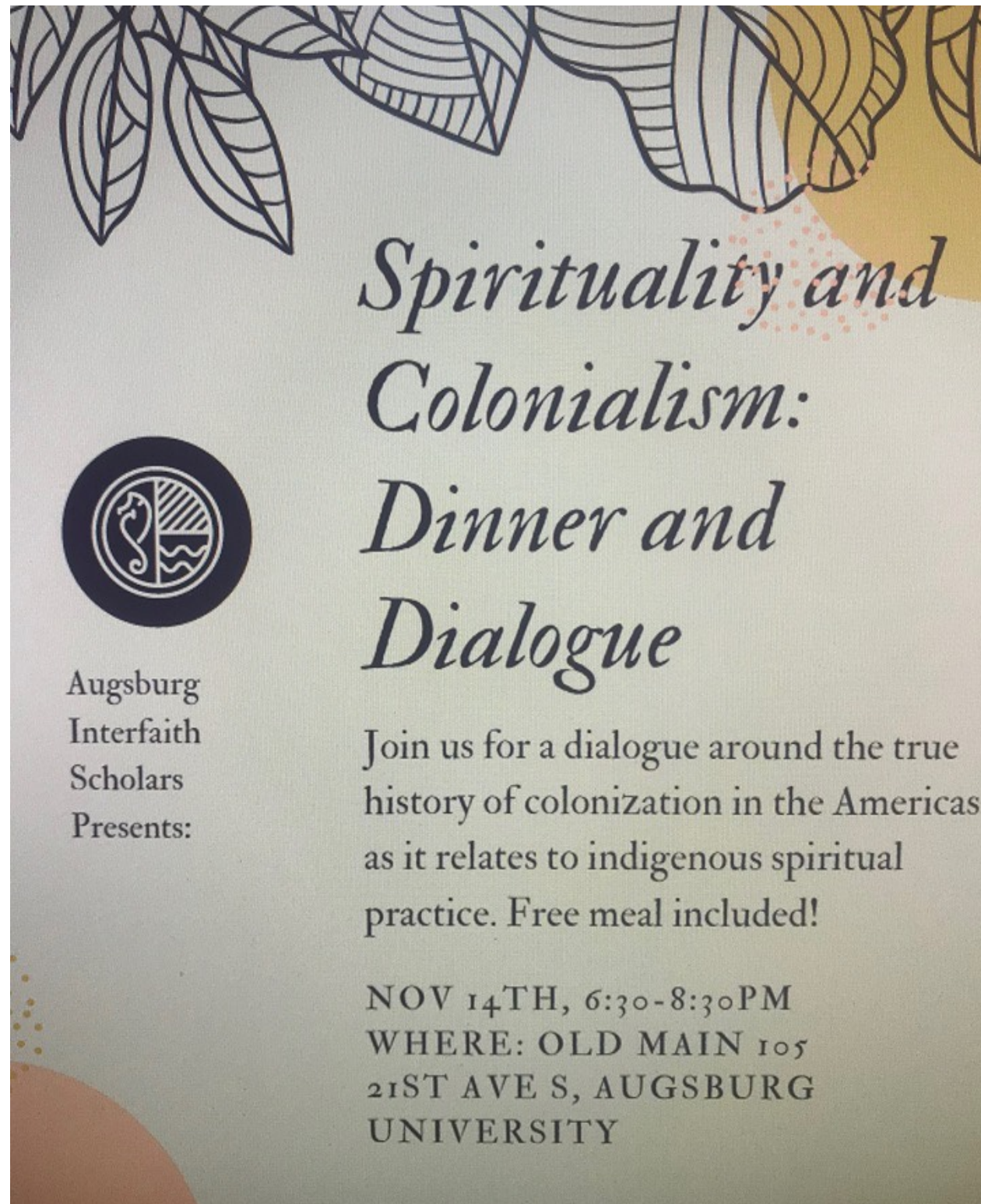
 Created by Gerald Aulandez



THU, DEC 8, 2016

Interfaith at Cedar Commons: A Spirituality of Racial Justice

 Created by Rachel Svanoe



"I remember we had at the beginning of each semester, a big brainstorming session where we would just throw out a bunch of different topics that the students [in the Interfaith Scholars Program at Augsburg] were interested in engaging... with that idea in mind of wanting to keep the topics pretty broad and inclusive... And then the way that we ultimately picked the topics was people would vote... Oh, and discuss before voting, like people would kind of share why they think one topic or another would be particularly exciting to engage on."

- Natalie

Section 03

Practicing Authenticity

01 | The Story Of Authenticity In Action

“Another kind of value or approach that got... clarified over time was the importance of honesty about all that we don't know and that we're not sure about and that is unclear to us or that's mushy or that feels fraught. So rather than people feeling like, ‘Oh, if I attend this gathering... about prayer practices, I have to have a clear set perspective that I'm ready to represent and then confidently defend,’ [it's more like] ‘I get to show up as my whole self, with things that I do feel strongly about, with things that feel really confusing and uncertain to me.’ And actually it really enriches the conversation if we all get to be more authentic and more genuine with the big mush.”

When one person is vulnerable in that way and kind of models that it's okay... to claim something, but then also to hold some tension around it, I think that just makes it that much safer for the next person to do that. And so... having a core crew of people that was ready to set that tone really had an impact on other people feeling they could do that.

- Rachel

“I feel like there would sort of be a snowball effect of when someone kind of was willing to kind of open that can of worms and be in in the messiness, then other people would be more comfortable doing that, too... Often the events would be structured where there would be time to discuss things as a large group, and time discussing as a small group, and I definitely noticed that the meatier... messier conversations would happen in the smaller group settings.”

- Natalie

02 Practicing Authenticity In Interfaith Dialogue

“A crucial, if not first, step for “right thinking” in reflecting across the myriad forms of believing that mark today’s landscape is acquiring fluency with one’s own foundations for believing. It may be tempting to plunge into what could appear as the exotic way others believe. However, without solid moorings in the traditions that give rise to my own way of believing, I am potentially a less effective dialogue partner for others. In all honesty, it is difficult to be a sounding board for other ways of believing if my own believing framework is insubstantial.”

- Edward Foley (2015), *Theological Reflection Across Religious Traditions*, p. 84

Reflect

What supports authenticity in your community?

What might get in the way of authenticity?

How might you model authentically reflecting on your own beliefs, dwelling in tensions, and openly listening to others?

What makes you nervous about that?

“For some students, the most pressing of these questions has to do with what Paul Knitter has designated a “replacement” theology in relation to other religions. For some students, the questions arise from an inchoate sense that Christianity must be capable of a response beyond “replacement,” but they are not yet aware of such an alternative. How are we to meet these students where they are, and then walk with them further down the road of theological discourse and community faith formation? Here I will turn to the second of the points I’d like to make about student learning.

If the first point is that we have to understand where students are coming from, what their questions are, and honor and respect their current stances of meaning-making, my second point is that as adults we can invite them to transform their meaning-making.”

-Mary Hess in Kristin Johnston Largen, Mary E. Hess & Christy Lohr Sapp (2014), *Interreligious Learning and Teaching: A Christian Rationale for Transformative Praxis*, p. 41-42

03 Following The Authenticity Of The Community



I think the students just seem to have a lot of fun putting these events together and getting to think creatively about all the different pieces, like, 'Okay, what are we gonna call the event? How are we going to advertise it and make it appealing to people? How are we going to share facilitation? What does shared facilitation look like? How are we going to make sure that we set ground rules at the beginning so that people are kind of operating on some sort of shared framework for the evening? What kind of food are we going to get? That's going to kind of tie everything together.'

I saw them kind of gain confidence in their ability to just... improvise... Sometimes I would see some of the planning get thrown out the window during the actual event, but in a good way. 'Cause it's like adapting to, 'Okay, who's actually here... What are the communication styles that are emerging? How might we need to kind of change the way that we're facilitating based on who's in the room?'"

- Natalie



04 Setting The Table For Authenticity

Relationships were always really central, which also meant that as often as we could involve food, we would involve food. So people were sharing a meal together, and some unstructured time.

I think there's something about having something *to do* and something *to share* and something for people *to contribute to* - 'sets the table' so to speak...for chatting and connecting."

- Rachel



Credits

Many thanks to Rachel and Natalie for authentically sharing their experience!

[Listen to the full conversation with Rachel and Natalie here!](#)

- Valerie Kaur (2020), *See No Stranger: A Memoir and Manifesto of Revolutionary Love*
- Edward Foley (2015), *Theological Reflection Across Religious Traditions*
- Adam Davis (editor, 2011), *Hearing the Call Across Traditions: Readings on Faith and Service*
- Margaret Wheatley (2007), *Keynote address to the NDS Queensland Communities of Practice*
- Kristin Johnston Largen, Mary E. Hess & Christy Lohr Sapp (2014), *Interreligious Learning and Teaching: A Christian Rationale for Transformative Praxis*