

# “Interfaith as a Continuum”

## Reflection by Rev. Rebecca Bryan

May 1, 2022

My first foray into transformative interfaith work happened immediately following 9/11. I was taking classes focused on interfaith and learning the Abrahamic traditions at Hartford Seminary. Full time student status at Andover Newton and subsequent ordination as a Unitarian Universalist minister were a few years away, but my experiences in interfaith work grew to be foundational to my call to ministry.

Before 9/11, the classes I audited were interesting. They quenched my thirst for learning, especially about theology. The occurrences of 9/11 changed that forever. What started out as interesting learning became essential in my life as a mother and a Unitarian Universalist and ultimately essential in my ministry.

At the time, my children went to school in West Hartford, CT with children whose parents were afraid to send them to our Montessori school because there were Muslims there. We started interfaith book groups with the children at school and church and began participating in social justice rallies, something I had never imagined myself doing.

After 9/11, interfaith work was about the safety and wellbeing of people whom my family and I knew and loved. We couldn't sit back and question whether what we did or didn't do mattered.

Those experiences were also formative for my children. I see it in them to this day as they live their lives as young adults. Their decisions about where they went to college, what they did for work, and whom they chose as friends and partners were all deeply influenced by these early days of justice and interfaith work.

Like most things, the evolution of one's engagement in interfaith work and understanding takes place on a continuum. The starting point is personal learning, which can be done by reading books, watching videos, or taking online asynchronous classes, where people can focus on specific areas of interest to them. In these situations, there is no regular interaction with other people, so there is a risk that the information shared could be incomplete or

inaccurate.

It is helpful as we move along the continuum to expand our learning to becoming part of a group, be that a class, a book group, or even here at church where we have the benefit of learning from other participants. The risk is that our learning may not be integrated into our lives. There is a greater likelihood that our lives will change when we learn within a group of diverse people affiliated with different faith traditions.

Learning accelerates when genuine *relationship is part of the learning*. At this point, learning moves from being solely intellectual to also residing in the heart. It is harder to objectify other people when you are in relationship, although that is always a risk. A risk in this type of learning is that it may feel good for those involved but may not go beyond that.

The final stage is when we become allies or partners. This type of learning extends beyond the individuals in the groups. The groups may work for the rights of the other groups within their community. Members of the group can form deep relationships that strengthen around things other than the original purpose. The differences in participants' theological beliefs remain part of the fabric of the relationship but are not the whole quilt.

The term interfaith, as I am using it, extends beyond formal religions and includes, for example, "nones" (people who do not go to church), atheists, emergent churches, and people who identify as spiritual but not religious.

Unitarians and Unitarian Universalists have a deep history of interfaith work with Jewish people, and this work has changed us. For example, our chalice, the symbol of our faith, was created as a sign of refuge for those escaping Nazi persecution. It was designed by Hans Deutsch for the Unitarian Universalist Service Committee and used as a stamp to help Jewish refugees escape Nazi persecution at the start of World War II.

One of the six sources of our Unitarian Universalist faith is "Jewish and Christian teachings which call us to respond to God's love by loving our neighbors as ourselves." Unitarian

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Universalists for Jewish Awareness offers education and community for people who come to Unitarian Universalism from Judaism and interfaith or multi-religious individuals and families. They also offer education and resources for everyone who has an interest in Jewish UU theology, stories, heritage, and resources.<sup>1</sup>

Locally we are blessed to have a rich and deepening relationship with Congregation Ahavas Achim. Our congregational walk to their building after the shootings at the Tree of Life Synagogue in Pittsburg in October 2018 was one of the first things we did together as a congregation after my arrival.

It was clear that night, when so many of you showed up, with little notice; and we marched over together to Congregation Ahavas Achim, to join hundreds of others in the community to demonstrate our support that interfaith is deeply regarded and understood for its potential, possibilities, and privilege.

We are honored to have you with us, Alex, and look forward to the journey to come.

Amen and blessed be.

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1 <https://uuja.org/>