


Cultivating Inclusive and Peaceful Communities: Multi-faith Sources of Inspiration

Mary Dana Hinton
College of Saint Benedict

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.csbsju.edu/social_encounters

 Part of the [Christianity Commons](#), [Peace and Conflict Studies Commons](#), and the [Race, Ethnicity and Post-Colonial Studies Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Hinton, Mary Dana () "Cultivating Inclusive and Peaceful Communities: Multi-faith Sources of Inspiration," *The Journal of Social Encounters*: Vol. 3: Iss. 1, 39-46.

Available at: https://digitalcommons.csbsju.edu/social_encounters/vol3/iss1/7

This Essay is brought to you for free and open access by DigitalCommons@CSB/SJU. It has been accepted for inclusion in The Journal of Social Encounters by an authorized editor of DigitalCommons@CSB/SJU. For more information, please contact digitalcommons@csbsju.edu.

**Cultivating Inclusive and Peaceful Communities:
Multi-faith Sources of Inspiration**

Mary Dana Hinton
College of Saint Benedict¹

Leaders, educators, clergy and laypeople engaged in the work of peacemaking must acknowledge the powerful role religion can play in the peacebuilding effort. However, we cannot limit our peacebuilding conversation to religious communities. Educational institutions also have a uniquely compelling role to play in the work of peacebuilding. This essay reviews why and how educational institutions must engage in this work; explores emerging best practices in this area; and concludes with a call to action.

Importantly, the essay highlights the importance, power and capacity of interfaith dialogue and education to support peacebuilding. Interfaith education and dialogue is not a call to abandoning religious traditions' unique and powerful convictions. Rather, it is a call to utilizing one's religious convictions for the common good and the creation of positive peace.

When I was a child, church was a place of unspeakable joy. Weekday evenings held Bible study or prayer and worship service, a midweek respite for the soul and a haven from the daily onslaught and pressures of life. Sunday mornings, which always felt like a holiday, brought a procession of people. Freshly washed cars were lined up outside as cleanliness was next to godliness. A parade of church hats, handstitched dresses, and threadbare but fine suits reflected that the material best of the community was reserved for the worship of the Lord. Lavish midday meals were prepared and ready to be returned to and communally shared that afternoon. Candy and tissues were stuffed into purses and quarters pressed into palms for the offering. I looked forward to the day when I would have “quiet money,” a dollar bill, to put into the plate. Sunday morning was a visible manifestation of care, pride, and faith in God.

Internally, joy, hope and courage also entered this space. While daily life may have held fear, anger, and a systematic desecration of our communal humanity, church was the antithesis to the reality of the day. It was a place where I could see others – their strength, their passion, their humanity – and likewise be seen. A place where we were not defined by material wealth or by the standards of a system to which we had limited access; a place where none of us were viewed as “less than.” It was a place where our humanity and the divine were united into one and all reflected the image of God. It was, without equivocation, a place of peace.

I imagine that the solace of peace is what members of the Tree of Life community in Pittsburgh, PA, sought on Saturday, October 27, 2018, when they walked into the synagogue for Shabbat morning services. The peace of seeing another with a shared experience. The peace of having one's humanity recognized. The peace of divine encounter. The peace of respite from a trying world, as Jewish communities in the United States are subject to half of the anti-religious hate

¹ Dr. Mary Dana Hinton is the President of the College of Saint Benedict

*Cultivating Inclusive and Peaceful Communities:
Multi-faith Sources of Inspiration*

crimes in our country (a number that has seen a 60 percent increase in the past year). People gathered on this Saturday morning to seek peace. They found hatred, violence, and injustice. Just before 10 a.m., a mass shooting killed eleven people within the synagogue, the deadliest attack on the Jewish community in U.S. history.

Just 48 hours earlier, a separate hate crime took place in Kentucky, when a shooter killed two African Americans at a local grocery store. This location was, according to reports, his second choice. His initial chosen location was the First Baptist Church in Jeffersontown, Kentucky where people had earlier gathered. It was only 90 minutes that separated the peaceful prayer of the church community and this terrorist.

Annually, mosques and synagogues are forced to engage and worship under the protective gaze of police and homeland security because of the number of credible threats against their seeking of peace. Attacking religious communities is not new in the United States. In the last decade: three were murdered at two Jewish community centers in Overland Park, KS, in 2014; 2012 brought the murder of six people in the Sikh Temple of Wisconsin; in 2008, shootings at the Tennessee Valley Universalist Unitarian Church left two dead. And, in 2015, nine members of the Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church in Charleston, SC, were killed during a prayer service. I find this scenario particularly painful because this prayerful community had invited Dylann Roof – the person who would later murder them – to enter. They had prayed with him, helped him to seek peace, before he terrorized and killed them.

But perhaps the best-known church-related massacre is the 16th Street Baptist Church Bombing in Birmingham, AL. On September 15, 1963 members of the KKK planted a bomb that killed four little girls who were playing together at the church during services. The church had been a hotbed of activity supporting peace, justice, humanity and restoration. It was a place that not only promoted peace for worshippers, but that sought to spread peace throughout the nation.

To have a conversation about peacebuilding demands a conversation about religion. For those who seek to terrorize and sow discord and hate, religion has often been used as a convenient, hurtful cover. For example, during Eid-Al-Adha this past year, while 30,000 people from many traditions gathered in US Bank Stadium in Minneapolis, MN, to celebrate unity and promote the common good, others tried to label the organizers as terrorists and sow seeds of fear and doubt.

Any of us engaged in, or supportive of, the work of peace building must acknowledge the powerful role religion can play in the peacebuilding effort. We also must recognize the disproportionate pain that faith communities experience in the work towards peace. But we cannot end our peacebuilding conversation with religious communities. Rather, educational institutions also have a uniquely compelling role to play in the work of peacebuilding. A role that begins with our educative mission but that extends beyond it, into interfaith dialogue, to truly pursue peace.

Within this article, I will talk about why and how educational institutions must engage in the work of peacebuilding; describe the importance of interfaith education as part of peacebuilding; explore some emerging best practices in this area; and end with a call to action for us all.

Education and Peacemaking

Most conflicts around the globe, including in the U.S., reflect what some might call tribal disputes or tribalism. The tribe may be defined based on race, ethnicity, economic class, religion, politics, gender, language, sexual orientation, or other boundaries. Chaos, war, and other conflicts erupt when tribes find themselves competing for resources or power and view the “other” as an obstacle to their prosperity. Today, we see this tribalism playing out in nearly every corner of our globe.

Domestically, we see intergroup dialogue within the United States increasingly polarized. This separation of peoples and retreat into corners is both a precursor to and symbol of tribalism. We tune into the news or radio station with which we are predisposed to agree. We see updates only from people and outlets we have already “liked” on social media.

It is, therefore, entirely possible to isolate ourselves to the extent that we believe everyone does, and should, think and often look, like us. For example, according to a Reuters poll, “About 40 percent of white Americans and about 25 percent of non-white Americans are surrounded exclusively by friends of their own race” (Dunsmuir, 2013). There is data citing numbers as high as 75% having racially exclusive friendships. We talk about the “other side or other tribe,” however you define the other side, as our opposite and yet we’ve never taken the time or energy to hear or learn their perspective. They, whomever you define as they, do the same. This critical divide, this isolation, is a facilitator of division, a significant barrier to dialogue and a significant barrier to peace.

I believe we are at a critical juncture in higher education and we need to respond. We have an opportunity to craft a community that stands counter to the prevailing tribalism of the day. As educators, we seriously must ask ourselves whether our mission is to perpetuate social norms and the status quo or to challenge ourselves by striving for a different reality on our campuses and for our students. Is it not our educative work to explore and dismantle these divisions in order to support the thriving of all?

It is here that education can play a critical role in promoting, maintaining, and sustaining peace. It is well documented that, “Education is perhaps the most important tool for human development and the eradication of poverty. It is the means by which successive generations develop the values, knowledge and skills for personal health and safety and for future political, economic, social and cultural development.” (Smith, 2011, p. 17). Education directly addresses those factors that inhibit and limit peace.

In a U.S. context, education has long been the greatest force to dismantling injustice, to providing opportunity, and to crafting a way forward even in the most desperate of times. Yet it has also been dispensed unevenly and unjustly, and sometimes withheld, to the social, personal, and economic peril of those impacted. And, for reasons we are all likely familiar with, we know that key issues of educational inequity in America have centered around issues of race and class. That these are the entry points for lack of peace provides a clear rationale for the importance and power of education in building peaceful communities. As expressed in the foreword to President Truman’s 1947 Commission on Higher Education report:

*Cultivating Inclusive and Peaceful Communities:
Multi-faith Sources of Inspiration*

If the ladder of educational opportunity rises high at the doors of some youth and scarcely rises at the doors of others, while at the same time formal education is made a prerequisite to occupational and social advance, then education may become the means, not of eliminating race and class distinctions, but of deepening and solidifying them (p. 36).

Clearly, educational communities have a unique opportunity to respond to those factors that promote peace and social advancement. The work of peace, inclusion and justice is at the heart of education. And yet, we cannot do this work without considering religious diversity as a critical part of our inclusion work. In July 2018 at the College of Saint Benedict's Liberal Arts Illuminated Conference, Noah Silverman of InterFaith Youth Corp (IFYC) challenged us to ask if our inclusion work acknowledges the power and importance of interfaith dialogue and religious diversity. Specifically, he asked: "Does our conversation around inclusive excellence and diversity include religious diversity? Does our institution, top to bottom, support its students to live and express their religious or non-religious lives freely on our campus?" (Silverman, 2018). Until we can affirmatively answer those questions our work is not done.

The Importance of Interfaith Dialogue

Therefore, for education to be most effective in this work it is imperative that we engage in interfaith dialogue. Douglas and Rhonda Hustedt Jacobsen (2012) write:

Paying attention to religion in higher education today is not at all a matter of imposing faith or morality on anyone; it is a matter of responding intelligently to the questions of life that students find themselves necessarily asking as they try to make sense of themselves and the world in an era of ever-increasing social, intellectual and religious complexity. (p. 30)

To fulfill our educative duty to students demands we encounter this interfaith work.

Yet we also know that our work is larger than even the individual students we have the privilege of serving. Our work is in service to the democracy within which we dwell. Eboo Patel, founder of Interfaith Youth Core, writes: "If American democracy depends on the vibrancy of our civic life, and if our civic life depends at least in part on the contributions of religious communities, then it would seem self-evident that facilitating such participation is a compelling interest for American democracy" (2018, p. 15). I would add that education is central to democracy and therefore education is essential to peacebuilding, done in partnership with religious communities and interfaith dialogue.

Engaging in Interfaith Dialogue on a Campus

So how do we do this? According to this journal's editors:

Peacebuilding involves many different activities and projects that address the causes of intergroup tensions, conflict and violence, both structural and direct, and that seek to establish both negative and positive peace, the absence of violence and/or the presence of social justice (Okumu & Pagnucco, 2017, p. i).

Part of that work is, of necessity on college campuses, the work of interfaith dialogue.

We are called to this active interfaith work. This is not new work in the College of Saint Benedict community, the campus at which I lead. For example, the college's founder Mother Benedicta Riepp was unwavering in her commitment to instruct young women and spread the Benedictine values to support the common good. Then and now, creating a more peaceful, just, and compassionate world is critical to our work of supporting the common good by addressing structural inequalities. Founded to educate the daughters of the German immigrants, Saint Ben's has long been involved in the work of social justice – the work of peacebuilding. I can say that creating a more peaceful, just, and compassionate world is critical to our work of supporting the common good by addressing structural inequalities. This is the mission upon which we were founded.

With history on our side, we can reflect the call found in “Leadership Practices for Interfaith Excellence in Higher Education,” which reads:

Higher education is well equipped to take on this charge. America's college campuses have long set the educational and civic agenda for the nation on issues such as multiculturalism, volunteerism, and environmentalism. College campuses are social laboratories where a range of interfaith strategies can be tested; faculty can help create the necessary knowledge base to support and guide interfaith engagement, and higher education can make it a priority to nurture interfaith leaders, much as it has done with multicultural leaders. (Patel, Baxter & Silverman, 2015)

The work of interfaith dialogue, the work of peacebuilding is the work of education. But we know that simply providing programs is not enough. Returning to Smith, we find: “The most effective forms of peace education go beyond interpersonal and intergroup encounter, but also address underlying causes and structural inequalities that can fuel conflict within societies” (2011, p. 31). We must consider the structural work of injustice in order to live fully into our peacebuilding initiatives.

Structural work is what we are engaging as we implement *BECOMING Community* at the College of Saint Benedict and Saint John's University. This inclusion and justice-oriented initiative will intentionally undertake a practice of ongoing community formation based on transformative inclusion. Our goal for *BECOMING Community* is to prepare and enable our students, faculty and staff to become agents of change, agents of peace, by preparing them to dismantle oppression rather than simply learning about oppression. We seek to make a substantive shift from the narrative of critique to the narrative of dynamic action. A structural shift to peacebuilding. We seek the work of justice, to build peace within, among and beyond ourselves and our community.

BECOMING Community will enable us to move our institutions into an intersection of fields. It will allow us to include local community partners, including religious communities, to ensure that our impact extends well beyond our campuses.

*Cultivating Inclusive and Peaceful Communities:
Multi-faith Sources of Inspiration*

We do this work because we know that our campuses exist within a complex and tumultuous world. We must help our students understand, navigate and lead in the world around them. That is part of what we promise them when we say we offer an inclusive, transformative, Catholic and Benedictine, liberal arts education. Our work is not to insulate our students from the happenings of the world, but to help them learn how to encounter, respond to, and, when needed, transform those realities. We know that this work is influenced heavily by the world around us and that our work in preparing students is changing.

Patel, Baxter and Silverman (2015), propose find nine best practices that we need to consider as we undertake this work to build inclusive, interfaith and peaceful communities:

1. *Establishing links to institutional identity and mission.* To promote effective campus engagement with religious diversity, it is essential that the priority of interfaith cooperation be directly linked to the institution's mission, values, and identity.
2. *Developing a campus-wide strategy.* An individual college or university's plan for promoting interfaith engagement flows from its mission and guides the campus as it tries to live into its vision across the curriculum and co-curriculum.
3. *Creating a public identity.* A campus's public interfaith identity complements its internal strategy. External communications and marketing materials can be used to highlight interfaith initiatives, and they should represent people from an array of religious backgrounds.
4. *Respecting and accommodating diverse religious identities.* The foundation for interfaith programming rests on both respect for the religious (or nonreligious) identity of all members of the community and reasonable accommodations related to how individuals live out their traditions in daily life.
5. *Making interfaith cooperation an academic priority.* Increasingly, scholars from a variety of disciplines are recognizing the importance of interfaith cooperation as a subject of academic research, analysis, and instruction.
6. *Building competence and capacity among staff and faculty members.* Professional staff members and faculty do much to shape the campus climate and the student experience.
7. *Encouraging student leadership.* Higher education movements lack "legs" if students are not committed or invested, and young interfaith leaders do not emerge unless they have civic spaces within which to develop.
8. *Engaging in campus-community partnerships.* Effective interfaith engagement requires practice, in addition to theoretical knowledge.
9. *Assessing campus climates and interfaith initiatives.* Interfaith cooperation is a relatively new phenomenon and, accordingly, intentional analysis and assessment are required to determine outcomes and goals, best practices, and efficacy.

At the College of Saint Benedict and Saint John's University, the question is: How do we ensure we are addressing each of these elements as we do this work? That is our peacebuilding call.

Is Peacebuilding Enough?

The call to action is clear. But I continually return to two challenges. First, I intentionally wrestle with whether peacebuilding had room and space for disagreement, discomfort, and, possibly, anger. How do we ask the systematically disenfranchised to not be angry when engaging in peacebuilding, an activity that will not only demand more from them but place them at greater risk in the process? I wrestle with how we, on college campuses, fulfill our educative and democracy missions while allowing the space to hear the courageous voices of those who are hurt. Out of moments of pain and darkness is emerging a cadre of leaders and a strength of community that may have only been able to be conceived in adversity. Courage is being born in those of us who might have once looked away. We especially see this as we claim, reclaim, and proclaim, all of our voices. Many of our voices, individually and collectively are becoming clearer, louder, and more powerful. We are encouraging our communities to lean in to support and encourage one another. How do we hear and embrace those voices for the sake of peace? Even when those voices take us into a place of discomfort with our status quo? As we build peace, I also want to build a space to hear fear, anger and courage.

Second, I keep finding myself returning to the opening image of my childhood church. A place of sights and sounds, values and traditions that shaped who I am. People of every religious background have convictions and commitments that are defining for them. As such, I feel the need to be clear that interfaith dialogue and education towards peacebuilding is not a call to abandoning those convictions. It's a call to utilizing them for the common good or, as Eboo Patel writes, "If the challenge of the diverse society is to embrace its differences and maintain a common life, the challenge of the particular religious community is to embrace the nation's common life while maintaining its difference" (2018, p. 129).

As I was writing these words, I could not get the sounds of my childhood church out of my mind. I could not temper my anger that 11 people from the Tree of Life community in Pittsburgh, PA, are now dead when all they sought was peace on Saturday, October 27, 2018. I felt a surge of disgust recalling all the other moments when sacred space has been defiled. I felt at a loss. I needed restorative hope.

I wondered how I could reconcile the reality of life and the anguish I have been feeling internally. And then I remembered the words of Alice Walker: "The more I wonder...the more I love" (1982, p. 283). I wondered how humans can destroy one another. I wondered how we can intentionally sow hatred. And with each of those wonderings, I knew I was being called to love more deeply. To see more clearly. Not to deny my frustration but to choose to answer it with love. To choose to answer with peace. To choose to answer with compassion for others and for myself. To choose love. Readers, if you find yourself feeling hurt; if you find your hope wavering; if you find your frustration mounting: I hope that you, too, choose love.

*Cultivating Inclusive and Peaceful Communities:
Multi-faith Sources of Inspiration*

References

- Dunsmuir, L. (2013, August 8). Mary Americans have no friends of another race: Poll. Reuters. Retrieved from <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-poll-race/many-americans-have-no-friends-of-another-race-poll-idUSBRE97704320130808>.
- Jacobsen, D. & Jacobsen, R. H. (2012). *No longer invisible: Religion in university education*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Okumu, J., & Pagnucco, R. (2017). Introducing the Journal of Social Encounters. *The Journal of Social Encounters*, 1(1), i-ii.
- Patel, E. (2018). *Out of many faiths: Religious diversity and the American promise*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Patel, E., Baxter, K. B., & Silverman, N. (2015). Leadership practices for interfaith excellence in higher education. *Liberal Education*, 101(1/2). Retrieved from <https://www.aacu.org/liberaleducation/2015/winter-spring/patel>.
- Silverman, N. (2018, July 7). Reframing the narrative: Leadership toward positive outcomes for all students . Panel discussion at Liberal Arts Illuminated conference, St. Joseph, MN. Retrieved from https://digitalcommons.csbsju.edu/libarts_conf/2018/events/5/.
- Smith, A. (2011). *The role of education in peacebuilding: Literature review*. New York, NY: United Nations Children's Fund.
- Truman, H. S. (1947, December 15). "Statement by the President making public a report of the Commission on Higher Education."
- Walker, A. (1982). *The color purple*. New York, NY: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt Publishing.