Entering the Spiritual Direction Public Square

Some of you may have heard me speaking of SDI’s efforts to make our Public Square an even more welcoming place than it is now. You may also be aware of our Inviting the Stranger campaign, launched here in Seattle a couple of months ago, which we intend to spread throughout the SDI network, and which is designed to address a related issue.

So, I thought I would take a few paragraphs in this issue of Connections, with the wide variety of voices represented within it, voices that cut across gender, age, and religion, to speak about this Public Square a little more.

I met two of my key mentors on this issue during the same span of time in the 1980s, when I was a graduate Theology student at Harvard Divinity School. One was Huston Smith, the famed interfaith author, scholar and distinguished professor, who was one of my teachers; and the other one was Fr Raimundo Pannikar, with whom I was fortunate enough to develop a personal relationship.

Huston Smith grew up with various religions on all sides. This eventually led him to his perennialist view of religion, which is summarized in the distinction Prof Smith made between the outward forms of religions, the “exoteric aspects” of rituals, norms, conduct, stories, and the like, and the inward forms, the “esoteric aspects” of unmediated inner experiences. “Exoterically, they’re very different, but esoterically they are one,” he famously said.

Professor Smith, a lifelong committed Methodist, nonetheless prayed in Mecca’s direction five times a day, studied and was deeply engaged with Vedanta for decades, tried his hand at Zen, incorporated Sufi practices and Yoga, and never found a contradiction between any of these. Indeed, he argued passionately that they strengthened one another.

Fr. Raimundo Panikkar had an even more varied background. Like me, born of a mother from Spain and a father from India, we instantly bonded over the tensions and opportunities of our upbringings.

Over the course of many lively sessions, he spoke about his initial trips to India as a Jesuit priest (he was raised in Spain) and the excitement he felt at coming into touch with Hinduism, and his fear that his Catholicism might be threatened.

Not only were his fears unfounded, he discovered that his faith was strengthened.

“I left Europe [for India] as a Christian, I discovered I was a Hindu and returned as a Buddhist without ever having ceased to be Christian.”

— Fr. Raimundo Panikkar

“The more we have the courage to walk new paths, the more we must remain rooted in our own tradition, open to others who let us know that we are not alone and permit us to acquire a wider vision of reality,” he added.

Raimundo was a spiritual adventurer, like Huston Smith, and spoke of the day to day creation of an increasingly rich spiritual and religious identity, by remaining constantly open to the new and unforeseeable.

And yet he was no syncretist, but identified as a Christian, a Hindu, a Buddhist and, in his later years, a secularist, simultaneously. In his dissertation, Panikkar had argued
that Christ, as a universal symbol of the divine and the human combined, belonged to the whole world, not just to Christianity, and could be found under other names in other religions, a belief he held throughout his life.

I mention both Professor Smith and Fr Pannikar as they are very much in keeping with SDI’s focus on the Spiritual Director Public Square, and inviting even more diversity within our ranks. This will be the theme of SDI’s conference in St Louis in April 2018, and is the central driving vision behind all our efforts around building community.

And this public square is not a sanitized enclave removed from the world, where we all operate with maximum harmony, though we certainly strive for that goal. Indeed, this public square can be a “messy” place, with its plethora of voices and emphases, filed by people with different approaches to God/The Universe/Tao/Brahman/Nature or however they conceive their Higher Power.

And while we are united and insist on mutual respect, understanding and tolerance, we are also mindful that our exoteric differences, as Prof Smith would have said, can be significant, and should not be swept under the rug.

So everyone is invited to join the SDI Public Square with whatever spiritual identity is their own, with no need to hang up that identity on the outskirts of the square to enter—how could it be otherwise? We recognize that this may lead to a degree of discomfort and tension from time to time, but believe the discomfort will eventually yield to enrichment.

And we hope, as both Prof Smith and Fr Pannikar did, that we may all find our spiritual and religious identities confirmed and enriched by coming into contact and communion with each other.

Amen.

Anil Singh–Molares
Executive Director
I Am Who I Am Because of My People
Tessi Muskrat Rickabaugh

We cannot thrive in isolation. We know this to be true of our daily life and faith walk, but it is also true of our life-long journey toward fully realizing—fully becoming—the complete being we were born to be. I wrote this piece in 2015, only about a year into my journey of discovering the companionship of those who have gone before me. I continue to walk that path, step by step growing in my understanding of the legacy my family, my tribe and my people have created for me. There is much beauty in that legacy, but also much ugliness. As my sister said, in response to the words below, it is a journey “into a greater appreciation and understanding of the beauty of who we are. One step at a time, we use the strength we were taught... to keep the bad out, [and] instead, to find the good.” May we all spend our strength in finding the good, and come to feel a little less alone. — Tessi

I officiated my sister’s wedding last month, wearing my grandmother’s ring and a stole that bears the name of my tribe and clan in the Cherokee language. I spoke Irish words, prayers that reflect the love and honor with which my people—Cherokee and Irish—approach the world. I stood as the intentional embodiment of our legacy of faith and love and pain.

My father didn’t attend the wedding. I’m not certain he’s aware that the last of his daughters married the love of her life this summer; he cut her out of his life almost two years ago, as he has two of my other siblings. As his mother did him.

“A legacy is something that is passed on to you that you have no control over,” Christian singer Rich Mullins once said. “There are all kinds of things that are pushed on us and we have no say over, and they shape the way we see everything.” My family has left me a legacy of alcoholism, severed relationships, depression, and fiery anger. My father tried his best to protect me from the dark side of our legacy. He cut off some family, built walls around interactions with others, and tried to raise us to be strong, moral, sober, God-fearing people. He taught me all that matters is who you are, and how you follow God.
Through this attempt to keep us safe, I was left feeling as if I were standing in a vast, dark world and the light I held could only illumine my siblings and parents. What else might be out there? Could any of it be good?

Heritage is given much importance in scripture; two of the gospels open with a recitation of Jesus’ genealogy. We are, in many ways, the sum of those who come before us. To judge a legacy as bad and to reject it robs us of our sense of belonging in a story which is much bigger than ourselves. There may be pain in my heritage, but when I chose to stop denying that part of who I am, I learned there is as much beauty as there is destruction. I come from a people who have struggled and grown, succeeded and failed, loved and hated, and most of all lived part of the human story. There is rich faith in my family, and fierce love. Learning where I come from has taught me to understand who I am and the desires God placed within me in a way I never could when I tried to serve him in isolation.

“The lines have fallen to me in pleasant places;” the Psalms say, “indeed, my heritage is beautiful to me.” My clan, the Anikilohi, were the teachers, the priests, the keepers of Story. They spoke for peace and guided the tribe in their journey to becoming their true selves. The Irish practice of soul friendship mirrors the relationship between spiritual companions and their seekers. I am who I am because of my people.

Tessi Muskrat Rickabaugh is a graduate of Shalem Institute’s spiritual guidance program and an interpreter for the deaf with Access Intrepreters LLC and the University of Missouri. A child of the Ozarks, she makes her home in Fulton, Missouri, USA, where she offers spiritual direction in person and online in English and ASL (for deaf seekers). A Native woman of Cherokee and Irish descent, Tessi engages her heritage as a member of the Long Hair Clan by curating The Barefoot Journey, an online community of people who foster peace and openness toward self and others through engaging the raw beauty of story. Find her writing at TheBarefootAuthor.com.
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Blooming in the Cracks
Edel McClean

On May 22, 2017, Salman Ramadan Abedi, a British citizen, detonated a homemade bomb at the exit of a concert by singer Ariana Grande in Manchester, England. The blast killed 22 people, in addition to Abedi, and injured 250 others. Edel McClean, one of SDI’s New Contemplatives, wrote this piece soon after.

I write from Greater Manchester, England in the days after a slaughter of innocents. I travelled today on a tram with silent commuters, have spoken with shell-shocked strangers, have heard tales of racist bile aimed at my Muslim neighbors. We live in a fractured world. We know this. But in the agony of Manchester (as in the agony of so many places around the globe) the fracture is tangible. It’s in the faces of weary police officers and worried parents and unnaturally subdued children. It’s in the stunned, sickening heartache that we all feel.

I cannot now look back at the Seeking Connection 2017 Conference in Toronto, except through the cracks in my fractured home city. I am grateful to have had the opportunity to share in such a gathering, and particularly grateful for the community formed among the New Contemplatives. Being a younger spiritual director (young, it seems, is defined contextually) can be a lonely place, and it’s hard to find those of our own generation who share our vision and our values. To be part of group which felt so naturally at home in each other’s company, listening, really listening, to each other’s voices was a rare and precious thing.

Two other highlights stand out for me. One was the interview with the SDI ambassador Maria Barrera which highlighted how through sheer determination, the voice of what is good, right and just cannot be silenced. There was a challenge in her story for me, a question of how I am blinkered to the ways that God is reaching out, because of the narrowness of my expectations, my preconceived ideas, my tendency to be limited by my own sense of what is possible.

The third highlight was a workshop delivered by Elyssa Wortzman on ‘Art as a Means of Jewish Spiritual Direction with Youth’. In one of the quieter moments of the Conference we heard a passionate explanation of one way in which young people can be given an opportunity to access for themselves some of the deep truths of faith. The gentleness of Elyssa’s approach held an unapologetic insistence that there is deep spiritual wisdom there for the taking. Sometimes we just need someone to help us to dare.

What does any of this have to do with where I began? In many ways, the days of the Conference seem distant from the streets of Manchester. But there are truths which matter in both places, truths that I can only speak from my own faith perspective.

Community matters. Deep listening is often the most precious and transformative thing we can offer to each
other. God reaches out in places we expect, in places we do not and will bloom in the cracks of any fracture. Our world needs us to dare - to dare to gently and unapologetically insist that there is wisdom and hope there for the taking, and that the truths that gathered us together in Toronto, also propel us back - listening, noticing, daring - into our fractured world.

Edel is a spiritual director, supervisor, facilitator and coach. She grew up in Northern Ireland and now lives in Bury in the North of England. She initially studied for a PhD in geography and worked in the community sector before training in spiritual direction and eventually discovering a way to do that full time. She is currently employed in the Learning Network of the Methodist Church in Great Britain. Her background is in the Ignatian tradition and she is passionate about Ignatian discernment and about integrating a lived awareness of God into all that we do as individuals and in groups. She has a particular interest in demystifying prayer, and in supporting the spiritual life of people with chronic illnesses. She is part of the New Contemplatives cohort for 2017.
Coming Out Happens to All of Us

John Backman

You never expect one comment to upend your whole life.

It happened to me last month in a conversation with a wise elder. I was describing my ideal approach to spiritual direction—to all my human interactions, really—in which I am so locked into the other person that I forget about myself. My wise friend agreed the ideal was pretty good as far as it went.

Then, in a voice so soft I could barely hear it, she dropped the question: “Where is John in all this?”

My conscious mind drew a blank. My unconscious mind saw it for what it was: a golden opportunity to unload decades of repressed schmutz.

You see, learning to let myself out—to disclose my feelings, needs, and vulnerabilities to others, sometimes even to myself—has consumed a lot of my life’s energy. I can tell it’s a problem because, whenever someone asks me what I want, I don’t understand the question.

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Over the years, I’ve made a lot of progress with this. But I’m still holding back in some important ways. In my friend’s question and a few other signals, I sensed God sending me a message: You need to pay attention to this. Again.

So I did. It was not pretty: massive emotional drama with a boatload of journaling.

And some interesting discoveries. For instance, this had a lot to do with gender. I’ve explained my genderfluidity elsewhere. Though I experience my inner self mostly as female, my outward expressions of that are limited (to nail polish). This nudge expressed a desire for more expression.

But it isn’t all about gender—not by a long shot. It’s about listening to my inner self for signals that tell me what’s going on around me. It’s about sharing myself to give others the opportunity for a me-too moment, where they see themselves in my experience and realize they’re not alone. Weirdly, it’s about humility: letting people see that I am just one person, utterly human, with all the foibles and imperfections and superpowers that come with being human.

It occurs to me that this is a kind of coming out. A coming out that has to do with gender, and a coming out that doesn’t.

I wonder if this holds a gigantic lesson for the body of Christ.
Here’s what I mean. Coming out is core to LGBTQ+ folks. We think about it a lot, because it’s difficult, it’s terrifying, and most of us have to do it many times.

At the same time, the past three weeks have made it clear that we all come out in some way. We all — if we want to be who God made us to be — allow more and more of ourselves to be seen, to be cherished, by the world. This too is difficult, and terrifying, and we have to do it many times.

Do you see the gift in this mess? It’s common ground. If the experience of coming out as gay, or transgender, or genderfluid to one’s loved ones is fraught with fear, and the experience of coming out for anyone is also fraught with fear, suddenly we can speak to one another from a common root of experience. We gain what I call the empathic glimpse: something in your life that gives you the tiniest peek into someone else’s life.

That generates empathy.

What would happen if more Christians—especially those who identify with traditional sexual orientation and gender—began to think about the ways they’ve had to come out? Would that provide the tiniest opening for empathy, a crack in the door that would enable them to talk with LGBTQ+ folks? Would more understanding be possible?

Would love grow?

John Backman is a spiritual director and an associate of an Episcopal monastery who regularly contributes to Huffington Post Religion. He writes and speaks about contemplative spirituality and its relevance for today’s deepest issues. He authored Why Can’t We Talk? Christian Wisdom on Dialogue as a Habit of the Heart (SkyLight Paths) and his articles have appeared in numerous faith-based publications. He has presented at a range of conferences, including the Parliament of the World’s Religions. This post first appeared on lovingboldly.net.
Healthy dependence is a mutuality in which I depend on you and you depend on me. I am reliable for you, and you’re reliable for me. We depend on each other wisely and appropriately—not irresponsibly.

In a healthy dependence, we learn how to make use of each other, how to serve each other, and how to be served by each other. You learn what your partner’s strengths are, and they learn yours. You use their strengths, and that validates them, strengthens them, and brings out the best in them. Healthy mutual dependence strengthens everyone involved, because when someone needs us, we have reason to be strong and good and responsible. And when someone nurtures us and takes care of us, we draw strength from that, too.

Healthy dependence is a wonderful experience. The happiness of togetherness, the strength that comes from it—the wind in our sails, the lightness of step and fullness of heart. And of course, we’ve all experienced the superior effectiveness of teamwork, when many hands make light the work. Emotionally and practically, life works better when we’re in it together.

We bring out the best in each other. Only in the context of trust and mutual love will we share our most beautiful, personal, and touching qualities. We need people to inspire us, desire us, need us, make demands on us, bring out the best in us, or most of who we are will not be expressed.

A mother is tender, soft, compassionate—but without her child, that sweetness would not have come out. A friend gets to be loyal and constant because their friend needs that. The heart is full of passion, but without someone to invite you, ignite you, excite you, your wonderful feelingness remains unexpressed, unexplored, and unknown.

We have good reason to be dependable. The truth is, we find our homes in one another. We depend on each other’s feeding and care; we depend on love, on relationship. We sometimes want to think of ourselves as unaffected, but if our relationship is going poorly, we are endlessly bothered; and if our lover or spouse doesn’t give us enough love, we’re unhappy. We can’t help it. In contrast, when our relationship is flourishing, we’re happy, strong, full of energy.

We all need the nurturance of being loved, and the happiness of loving. But the only way to have love reliably is to be reliable for others, otherwise they won’t open up to you, or stay close to you. The love you take is equal to the love you make. So give the love, care, and commitment you want and need from others. Then you can be part of an endless circle of love.

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The Conference that Changed My Life – at Age 84

Dr. David Jones

Interconnection

I came to Toronto for this year’s Spiritual Directors International conference expecting an inspiring five days. Little did I know that not only would it inspire me, but it would in fact change my life. As I listened to The Interfaith Amigos and shared with new friends, I was led to three new life understandings that will never leave me.

The first is that we have the opportunity to look at any event in life and choose to accept it as a gift. Not all gifts bring pleasure initially. When our children were immunized, our gift to them was protection from future illness. As they grew, we gave them the gift of discipline with love. At those times, they did not see their pain as a gift. My wife of 60 years died, and I am challenged by my own construct of gift, to regard it as a gift. But it was a gift to her, and again, in the spirit of the Interfaith Amigos, a gift to me, because it has caused me to examine my purpose in life in my eighth decade. I can choose to spend the rest of my days in deep mourning of my loss, with the negative energy associated with it, or I can choose to explore it as a gift, inspiring and infusing my life with positive energy to be shared with those around me.

A second understanding I was given was about aging. I would hope few would challenge my legitimacy at 84 to comment on that subject. I have now been blessed with an understanding which is totally new for me. It comes from a growing literature on age and aging – some of it very subjective, but some with significant objectivity, supported by respected research. We begin to age the day we are born, and if we reach a day when we no longer age, we call that our day of death. Early on, age is celebrated: the day we’re born; when we reach 16 and can drive; age 18 and can vote; an age when we can legally drink (a celebration not without its downside). But at some point, perhaps in our 60s or 70s, we may develop a perspective on aging that seems not to lend itself to celebration – the physical, mental, emotional challenges we face. However, should we make it to 90 or 100 we celebrate again. But age and aging on any day of our lives can be embraced with a totally different perspective. I am indebted to author Dr. John Robinson’s insights in his book *The Three Secrets of Aging*: “Our final stage of life offers an astounding new evolutionary process: an initiation into an entirely new stage of life. A transformation of self and consciousness, and a revelation of a new – and sacred – world, right where
we are.” Robert Browning confirmed it poetically: “Grow old along with me. The best is yet to be; the last of life for which the first was made.”

My third understanding, brief and simple, relates to the conference’s title “Seeking Connections.” This understanding can change anyone’s life. It is simply this:

We are, each one of us, already connected. If we choose to accept that fact as a gift, we can bask in joy.

Dr. Dave Jones is a retired family doctor, who also is board certified in Preventive Medicine. Pennsylvania provided his professional education: Grove City College, Thomas Jefferson University, School of Medicine, and the University of Pittsburgh. Throughout his career he worked to help measure, manage and improve the quality of health care services in this country, and was the founding editor, and is now Editor Emeritus, of the American Journal of Medical Quality.

Dr. Dave Jones

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No Longer A Stranger

Joyce Horn

I stood at the curb alone waiting for the hotel shuttle. A bus stopped, the door opened, and the kind driver gently said that he recognized the look on my face. I was new to this place; a stranger. Then he directed me to the relocated shuttle stop. As I approached the designated spot, a voice from the crowd asked if I was going to the SDI conference.

Wow, how did she know? Must have been that look on my face again. First time in Canada, at the SDI annual event, and I felt brand new to the world of spiritual direction having completed my training only two years ago. I had no idea what to expect. I arrived a stranger with an open-heart ready to soak up the wisdom of others.

I soon felt at home with kindred spirits. After all, this was a gathering of persons with an affinity for “the Divine in me sees the Divine in you.” The strangeness of being a first-timer began to disappear, and I entered a sacred space not unlike that of a spiritual direction conversation. My soul began to dance with renewed energy and joy at being part of this gathering.

In this sacred space, I was invited to notice a stranger within that had been accompanying me for many months. In December 2015, I was diagnosed with stage III melanoma. I named my tumor Melly. She stirred up all sorts of strange things in my body, mind, and spirit to the point that I barely remembered who I was before Melly. Sharing and listening with others at a lunchtime directed conversation helped me to notice the strangeness within myself and to begin to welcome her. As I did, I began to remember my Self again in new ways. Throughout the remainder of the event, participating in the sacred space with a rich diversity of spiritual companions nourished my whole being like a healing balm.

By the end of the conference, I no longer felt like a first-timer, a stranger, or a stranger to myself. I soaked up some wisdom, and I shared some wisdom. I became part of a beautifully diverse community that nourished each other especially when they gathered together. I like to imagine that during those days in Toronto, we generated waves of positive energy that spread over the city and then beyond as each person carried the healing energy back to her or his corner of the world. I like knowing that we can do this again in April 2018—showing up for one another and spreading much needed positive energy throughout the world. See you in St. Louis!

Rev. Joyce Horn is a wife, mother, caregiver, and an ordained Deacon in the United Methodist Church. She is also co-founder of The Listening Place Spiritual Center in Durham, North Carolina which offers a formational training program for spiritual direction rooted in Ignatian spirituality.
Jerry Wagner, M.Div., Ph.D.  
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