

# **Multi-Faith Learning as Peace Education**

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Thank you, Cora, for such a laudatory introduction that encourages me to reflect on what this prize can contribute to the further advancement of the peace education efforts you have noted.

I am deeply honored to be this year's laureate of the [El-Hibri Peace Education Prize](#) and to be among a group of people who adhere to the goals and principles of the [El-Hibri Charitable Foundation](#): encouraging religious diversity; promoting interfaith collaboration; facilitating dialogue, understanding and tolerance. I am also honored by the presence of the El-Hibri family and grateful for the mission with which they have charged this foundation. I extend my most sincere thanks to the El-Hibri Foundation for taking up this mission at a time when it is so important to approach peace and tolerance from a faith basis; and to educate to resolve and transcend the obstacles to peace posed by the intolerance that presents itself as faithfulness to a religious creed.

## **Diversity and Dialogue**

Indeed, the three key components of the foundation's mission have always been integral to my approach to peace education. So this prize has very special meaning to me both personally, professionally and potentially to the field that I have seen evolve and develop over nearly six decades. Personally, it is a validation of a core belief in the capacity of human beings to approach the problem of peace through learning that has informed all my years of learning and teaching in the field. Professionally, it recognizes that the forms of learning we have cultivated in the theory and practice of peace education as manifest in the [International Institute on Peace Education](#) (IIPE) are achieving their purposes and goals of promoting dialogue on best practices among participating peace educators and inspiring a common inquiry into the further development of the educating capacities of members of IIPE's global network as they construct their own respective learning communities throughout the world. Potentially, it offers the possibility for the long overdue integration of faith, a significant factor in peacelearning and in peacemaking, into peace education as a subject to be studied in an open inquiry into its relationship to the complexities that comprise the substance of the field.

The El-Hibri mission is most timely when authentic dialogue - especially dialogue between and among those who hold different core beliefs - is so urgently needed. We are all too painfully aware of the ideological "talk -pasts" that brought the US government to "shut down." These miscommunications are typical of the

vituperative exchanges that pass for political discourse in this society, impeding the effective functioning of our government and infecting our dealings with others in the global system. Few seem to have the skills to communicate constructively with those with whom they differ.

We observe the nay-sayers on the Iranian “charm offensive” on both sides of this difficult international dialogue. Some Americans warned against a “wolf in sheep’s clothing” when the Iranian leader spoke words of accommodation to the fall 2013 General Assembly. Accusations of treachery were spewed by some Iranian dissenters upon greeting President Rouhani on his homecoming from the UN. People of all faiths, both religious and political, and of various competing or contradicting worldviews need to learn to communicate effectively and civilly. I believe that effective, civil communication is most likely to occur within a context of respect for the humanity and some knowledge of the worldviews and animating values of the other.

Peace education, having advocated and taught the practice of dialogue, might now look more deeply into the context and frameworks in which dialogue takes place. Authentic, constructive dialogue cannot take place in the absence of respect for the other. More constructive, mutually enhancing outcomes are achieved when the participants have the capacity to listen; knowledge of the other’s goals; and a valid understanding of their values, beliefs and worldviews, all elements of what is referred to in the conflict resolution process as “interests.” However, the elements I seek to bring to attention here lie beneath and actually form interests. These elements are the core values, the religious beliefs and ethical principles that inform the worldviews and behaviors that produce the interests and the conflicts they may provoke.

### **Universality of the Value of Human Dignity**

The values that El-Hibri draws from Islam are generally shared by most religious faiths. The tragic reality we confront in our efforts at peacelearning and peacemaking is the failure of many of “the faithful” to practice those values. Even more lamentable, is the horrendous violence and repression committed in the name of faith. Universal religious values are tragically not fully and sincerely practiced by all adherents to the world’s religions, many of whom stand by as their religions are perverted to ideological and political purposes. This destructive perversion might be called religion-based violence. I do not perceive it as it is sometimes called, religious or interreligious violence, for there is little evidence that doctrinal disputes give rise to it. Rather, it is identity based, directed by members of one religion or sect at members of another or at a political authority held to be counter to their sectarian political interests. I see these as political as the aim is to gain power to impose their particular sectarian norms on the whole society, not beliefs but personal behaviors and social relationships, dictating what comprises good and evil. While I tend not to agree with the term fundamentalist, much of what I refer to here is attributed to “fundamentalists” and “militants.” As there are those who profess

and adhere to the fundamentals of their faiths who neither commit nor condone religion-based violence, it may be more appropriate to refer to those committing this violence as *intolerants*. Like gender-based or race-based violence, religion and sect-based should be a subject of inquiry for peace education and peace research.

We also see the motivating values of the El-Hibri Foundation echoed in the secular ethics articulated in the [Universal Declaration of Human Rights](#), the international standards of human rights, and the [Declaration of the Elimination of All Forms of Intolerance and of Discrimination Based on Religion or Belief](#), adopted and set forth by the United Nations to establish universal human dignity as a normative aspiration for all human relations and all societies of the global order.

Thus the fundamental norms derived from both religious and secular ethics, are infused with the concept of human dignity that makes tolerance and social justice an imperative of the social and human relations that would inform any just and peaceful society. Human dignity has been the seminal value concept of my approach to peace education and the core of the beliefs that inform my professional endeavors in striving toward the realization of the precepts of what I understand to be the fundamental philosophy of the United States. So my approach to peace education is, indeed, a matter of faith - not my religious faith, but my faith the “self evident truths” of the American political creed to which I was socialized in a small public elementary school, long before I came to truly know and understand the Christian ethics of the social gospels. There is, as with most persons of any religion who work for social justice in this society, a normative consistency between their religious values and the secular values of human rights, values also embraced and fervently pursued by many agnostics and atheists, as a kind of secular faith. I tend to believe that all who strive for social change hold faith in some chosen ethical principles and/or hoped for possibilities for the achievement of a better world.

While many have taken up the struggle for peace and justice from the imperatives of religious faith, in my case it was this secular faith of a politics of justice that called me to work with those of all faiths (and those who claim no faith) to try to assure that peace education cultivates learning for the very values symbolized in the El-Hibri Peace Education Prize: *respect for human diversity* in all its forms, including religion – peace education assumes that diversity, both ecological and social, is essential to the survival of our species and the planet we share; *intergroup cooperation and collaboration* among people of the various differences, including religion, that distinguish groups one from the other – collaborations that derive from the urgently needed exchanges that peace education designates as “dialogues of difference,” conversing across the separations that fractionalize human society; *understanding and tolerance*, not as the end of a dialogue, but as the predisposition we bring to dialogues of difference so that tolerance becomes the “threshold of peace,” the first stage in a process of coming to know and understand the other as an effective path to peace.

The structure of tolerance as the threshold of peace is built upon the fundament of human dignity and responsibility. Recognition of the universal human value and dignity of all persons is the essence and the foundation of peace as asserted in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. The value and the injunction of the civic and personal responsibility to protect and strive for human dignity inform most ethical and religious belief systems. Many have faith in the potential that the realization of these rights holds for the achievement of a humanly just public order, so they work for peace through the defense of human rights with dedication equal in strength and commitment to those striving for these ends out of religious faith.

### **Defining Faith, Interfaith and Multi-faith**

It was only in coming to work closely with people who were motivated to peace action by religious faith that I came to appreciate an element that had been sorely missing in my own religious education, and I fear that of others of various faiths. I had interpreted “religious instruction” as the acceptance of rules of good behavior that would be pleasing to God and practicing rituals and sacraments to bring us closer to God. The main emphasis as I recall the religious ideas of my childhood were on the rules of behavior, some of which made you worthy of the sacramental. Thus do I have a little sympathy for those rule bound believers whose motivations derive from a rules-based imperative, frequently labeled “fundamentalists” whose interpretation of their faith impels them to seek to have their religious rules apply to the whole of a society that does not. But that limited sympathy stops short of the acts of violence such application has provoked, such as bombing women’s health clinics and stonings for infraction of gender rules imposed in the name of religion. It is exactly to overcome tolerance of such religion-based violence that I advocate multi-faith learning, observing those limits to tolerance invoked to defend human rights and preserve human dignity. This invocation of secular ethical standards has led me to think of a step beyond the inter-faith realm that would make for an understanding that conducts learners through the threshold of tolerance to authentic respect and appreciation of religious differences.

Recently, I have begun to reflect on a broader interpretation of faith that has lead me to advocate for what I identify as multi-faith learning as an essential component of peace education. Faith within this frame of reference does not require adherence to a religious belief or school of philosophy. *Faith* I take to be the *core animating beliefs we hold about the nature of being human and relating to the world and others*. These beliefs we hold without reference to material evidence or proof. They are inner convictions about intuited notions of good. The beliefs of various philosophies, secular humanists and tolerant atheists (I hold some recently published atheists to be among the “intolerants”) are equally as important to understanding human diversity and learning to appreciate it as a source of human enrichment, the element of life that safeguards our survival as a varied but viable single species.

Interfaith cooperation has been a significant factor in the peace movement for decades and has had many successes in confronting neighborhood or city-wide injustices. In some cases they have impacted national policy as we have seen

recently with the parallel and cooperative efforts of the Evangelical Sojourners and the Catholic Network, taking on the issues of the deprivations imposed on the poor by budget cuts. Similar interfaith collaborations manifest in the environmentalist efforts to ban fracking, combat human trafficking, and, in concert, taking on a range of social justice issues.

Interfaith action and learning is compatible with, but distinct from multi-faith endeavors. Interfaith cooperation occurs when people of different faiths address an issue from their agreements on what constitutes a problem or a commonly desired goal. The participants seek to transcend their differences, placing the focus on the commonly shared values that lead them to hold similar positions on some public peace and justice issues. Interfaith is a realm in which we engage in experiential learning about the moral and human commonalities shared by people of faith. This form of learning, integral to interfaith movements for various public causes, is most evident in the peace, human rights and religious freedom realms. It becomes more and more socially significant in the face of the multiple interrelated social problems and issues of religious intolerance that concern all faiths. So, too it is an essential factor in adjusting to growing interfaith families and the consequent shared “sacred” events and common worship.

Multi-faith initiatives are those in which religious differences are central to the common endeavors – endeavors that are likely to be strengthened and made more effective by embracing the diversity and surfacing the significant differences so as to learn to know the other more deeply and thus to work with them more effectively. Such initiatives provide a paradigm for a constructive approach to dialogues of difference. Multi-faith learning can occur when people of various faiths come together to address an issue from the particular and distinct perspectives of their respective beliefs. It is a means through which elements and aspects of the beliefs of others may be learned in an environment of respect in which understanding the other helps all to move toward the development of more effective common means to the resolution of the issue that brings them together. It is, in effect, a controlled experiment in education for the positive application of diversity to confronting some of the causes of the fragmented and fragile human condition.

Viewing learning as a process of becoming, I believe multi-faith learning could help lead learners to become more cosmopolitan and compassionate in their views of difference. Moving them from ignorance to understanding and positive tolerance to the interactive, mutually enhancing respect that is the ground on which sustainable peace may be built. Respect begets respect. No greater respect can be accorded than truly seeking to understand the animating beliefs and core values of the other. Respect for difference, when there is full knowledge to the nature of the difference, is of a higher order than respect that overlooks difference. It would be more lasting and resilient.

Adopting multi-faith and interfaith learning as components of standard citizenship education is not introducing religious practice or religious instruction into schools.

Responsible peace educators observe the principle the separation of church and state, so public education about world religions and systems of ethical beliefs is to be pursued as is any study of subject matter, as an objective inquiry. Inquiry into beliefs and practices that profoundly affect the lives and worldviews of the diverse human family with whom we must collaborate is essential learning for our common survival. Such inquiry does not persuade to a point of view, nor demonstrate a preference for any particular belief, save that of the universality of human dignity. Neither should any religious belief determine the content of public school curricula nor the books in school libraries. Neither multi nor interfaith learning are religious instruction or ideological indoctrination, but teaching about faith as an essential part of the human experience, offering knowledge of others to enrich our own experience. More importantly, it could contribute to learning to know and respect others by more fully understanding the beliefs and values that inform their worldviews, goals and behaviors. It can be made clear that respecting a faith is not embracing it; that respect for difference means acknowledging, not ignoring it.

As I acknowledge the limits to tolerance invoked when religion is used to rationalize violations of human rights or to impose political policies inimical to the wider society, I also assert that knowledge of the actual teachings of religious faiths, rather than the interpretations of that faith put forward by the media, (sometimes to favor or denigrate particular factions of a faith) promises to move learners beyond stereotypes toward understanding. Such knowledge would provide the basis for critical reflection on the negative images of others as alien and the rampant distortions of belief that inflame and infect the public discourse; distortions that in some societies give rise to violent conflict. Reflective inquiry as multi-faith learning would focus on beliefs and values rather than the practices and customs through which the other is made alien, objectified in the stereotypes that focus on the strange and unfamiliar, serving to cloud authentic interfaith and intergroup understanding, standing as an obstacle to peace.

Faith as a component of a peace-learning inquiry might pose among others some of the following queries: "What are the fundamental animating beliefs of a group or culture that inform their experience of the world and how that group affects the world? How might others interact with them in the most constructive way possible to the mutual advantage of all? How might the issues at hand look to those of that faith? What outcome might they seek? In what ways might such outcomes affect others? Might they be able to adjust them so that even within the frames of their beliefs, they might accommodate to others?"

Assuming the inquiry is seeking a socially just, politically effective goal, it would bring multiple perspectives to study of common public or social issues and problems: "How does the problem look from the perspective of a particular faith's normative worldview? What responses might be proposed from the faith perspectives of socially responsible citizens? How would each of these proposals be viewed from the normative perspective of various core values and animating beliefs? Which might be acceptable to all? Are these the most potentially effective courses of

action? How might we reach a course that is ethically acceptable and politically effective as viewed from the interest of the wider society?"

### **Conclusion: Cultivating Critical, Creative, Courageous and Compassionate Citizens**

Interfaith learning is a means to learning *with* the other – a responsible respectful way that manifests the imperative of universal human dignity. Multi-faith learning is learning *about* the other, bringing the study of core religious values and animating beliefs into secular and other classrooms now characterized in this country by wide cultural and religious diversity.

Finally, the article of faith that most inspires my advocacy of multi and interfaith learning is a profound belief in the human capacity to learn to transform ourselves and our societies, to work through the dialogues of difference, learning to construct the public institutions and invent the political processes that could assure our living by the values that inspired this prize for which I express my sincere thanks to the El-Hibri Charitable Foundation. The Prize validates the goals set forth here for multi-faith learning, the development of critical, creative, courageous and compassionate citizens; citizens such as those who sit today in this audience. I am honored and delighted to be among you. Thank you all.

### **Revised from October presentation notes on December 3, 2013**

**Note:** Other aspects of the themes that formed the basis of the El-Hibri Peace Education Prize acceptance remarks may be found in "[A Study Guide on the Declaration of the Right to Freedom of Religion or Belief](#)" posted on the website of the [People's Movement for Human Rights Learning](#); in "Meditating on the Barricades" in Trifonas and Wright, [Critical Peace Education: Difficult Dialogues](#); excerpted in [In Factis Pax](#), the web journal of the [Center for Nonviolence and Democratic Education](#) at the University of Toledo; and in [Tolerance: the Threshold of Peace](#), published by UNESCO.