FACILITATING OTHERS

IN THEIR ENCOUNTER

WITH THOSE

OF OTHER FAITHS

INTERFAITH CENTER
of GREATER PHILADELPHIA

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Welcome to the exciting and meaningful work of supporting persons who want to get started with interfaith engagement. There is an advantage in choosing the concept *interfaith engagement* over *interfaith dialogue* because the latter sometimes conveys only the intellectual pursuit of interfaith encounters. In fact, these encounters have their grounding in many kinds of human experience. Four of these are: that of being neighbor to the other, that of working with others to address social concerns, that of entering into spiritual spaces or rituals or aesthetic or religio-cultural events with persons of other faiths, and that of exploration of beliefs, values, and meaning.

Our heightened consciousness that every person is a valuable creation of God has leads us to a deep reverence of diversity, new ways of understanding ourselves and our world and new ways of encountering and naming God/the sacred. Our collective experience gives us a heartfelt sense of presence to the whole world, opening us to other religions, cultures and traditions. This leads us to a dialogue of life that is intercultural, interreligious and transformative. We have seen the goodness in and benefits of these encounters. We want to do what we can to enable others to have fruitful and enjoyable interfaith encounters.

Hopes for this coaching session

- To have deepened one's own spirituality of compassionate presence to others in our world

- To have brought to articulation the various dimensions of interfaith encounters in my/our life situation

- To become conscious of major paradigms underpinning the art of good interfaith engagement

- To have explored the basic skills of facilitation for good interfaith encounters

- To have gained confidence in being a faithful and constructive presence in interfaith situations leading to greater realization of kinship, justice and peace

Myself as a gift to the process

- Is there a story that demonstrates my desire to support others in making their interfaith encounters good ones?

- What <u>beliefs</u> have I experienced as underpinning my passion for interfaith endeavors,
  - In general?
  - From my own faith tradition?
  - From another faith tradition?

- What <u>values</u> do I find best lay a good foundation for constructive, enjoyable interfaith encounters?

- What are some good <u>spiritual practices</u> that enable me to support other people in having good interfaith encounters?

Stages of faith (spirituality) related to Interreligious Dialogue

After years of research and reflection, James Fowler developed an identification of what he termed were stages of faith development. "We looked at faith as a way of knowing and seeing the conditions of our lives in relation to more or less conscious images (God/the sacred) of an ultimate environment…All of these play critical roles in shaping our actions and our reactions in life." *Stages of Faith*, (Harper, San Francisco, 1981, p. 92). These stages of faith comprise the following:

Stage One: Intuitive-Projective faith which an infant receives directly from the nurturing and teaching of parents or parent figures; ("I'm this religion because my parents are this religion.")

Stage two: Mythic-Literal faith in which one absorbs literally the myths, beliefs and practices of the community in which one is immersed; ("Adam and Eve ate an apple and sin entered the world; there is a Santa Claus.")

Stage Three: Synthetic-conventional

In general the majority of younger and older adults find their home in stage three of Fowler's paradigm. This means that there is a worldview embracing people beyond their own family that includes people in their social, occupational, religious, and ethnic circles. If it includes persons of other ethnic groups, the exchange is based in limited or role type interactions. Their faith does not instigate a lot of interest in or concern for such folks. As long as competing interests can be satisfied and other crises do not loom on the horizon interactions are generally civil and disinterested.

Significant others in the communities of which one is a part play a vital role in shaping of one's expectations and value articulations. A very important facet of this stage of faith is that values and many principles that engender response remain tacit, or under-articulated. The authority of those bearing traditional roles in the community or the "consensus" of a peer group is the usual reference point as to what is acceptable and even ethical. One looks to such authority to validate one's worldview and for a sense of whether one is worthy or valuable.

From this stage there can emerge a personal sense of one's own story, its origin and its future with the challenge to interact in the present to shape this story. Remaining in Stage Three can yield a significant sense of comfort and reassurance. But there are pitfalls which include: (1) such internalization of the evaluations and worldviews of others that the development of one's inner authority is jeopardized and (2) betrayal by significant others can result in despair about ultimate being or a relationship with an intimate God unconnected with life relationships.

Stage Four: Individualize – Reflective

Most significant in the Stage Four of faith is that the creation of one's own abstract faith constructs are based upon the reflection and decisions leading to a consciously chosen worldview. Faith is no longer contingent on the traditional network of significant others or through adherence to roles. One's sense of meaning is differentiated from that of others. Demythologizing is characteristic of this stage. There can also be a tendency to absolutize one's now unique critical thought and assessment of realities, symbols, and beliefs, which make up one's unique worldview in Stage Four.

What is the impact of Stage Four on the impetus for interreligious interaction? Often it is the encounter with a faith stance of an individual of another faith tradition, or with someone who has herself or himself moved beyond Stage Three that enables one to meet the personal challenge to Stage Four and beyond. Surely Stage Four of faith lays the foundation for seeing truth, beauty and goodness in a faith perspective other than one's own.

Stage Five: Conjunctive

The fifth stage of faith, Conjunctive, is where one is impelled towards an engagement in the deeper reality of life. The unique and authentic concepts and values, which grounded a vibrant Stage Four of faith, are experienced as poles in a more integrated faith perspective with still other poles of faith perspective. Both are now accommodated within a more integrative frame of reference. One experiences a commitment to justice freed from the radical biases of culture, religion, political or economic entities. There is an attraction to assisting others in developing both a more individualized reflective faith and a more integrative, inclusive and generative faith stance.

Stage Five appreciates the truth, beauty, goodness in the meanings it can find in the symbolic, rituals and myths of its own and other faith traditions. At this point one can see that Stage Four readies one for the phenomenon of interreligious interaction and its necessity in today's world. One further opines that proactive and creative engagement in Interreligious Dialogue can begin in Stage Four and will blossom in Stage Five. It is the Stage Five person who has the faith and conviction to witness to this possibility and can support others in acquiring the faith and the capacity of dialoging across religions in the four modalities of interreligious dialogue. Transition beyond Stage Five is not a common human phenomenon.

Stage Six: Universalizing Faith

A Stage Five person's inclusivity and genuine appreciation of his/her own faith and faith tradition as well as that of others lays the ground for a call to Stage Six, a radical actualization. Persons who out of their faith and trust lay their lives on the line for the sake of a fulfilled human community, one in touch with and caring for the whole web of life, have generated a worldview in which the sacred/God/ultimate environment includes all being. They create spaces of possibility for moving toward a world freer of crippling and oppressing political, religious, social, economic and cultural conditions toward a new world reality.

The processes espoused by the people characterized by Stage Six faith often call into question familiar structures in which we base our sense of security, and even survival. These prophetic individuals are often persecuted. Fully integrated human beings with a great sense of clarity and sense of directness and of simplicity, they love life yet hold it loosely, are open to interaction/friendship/dialogue with people at any stage of faith in any faith tradition. Theirs is a universal community of humankind, of the whole web of life.

Self as a religious, cultural person

- Religious experience: Naming what are, for me, two significant beliefs and two significant practices that flow from my religious upbringing.

- In terms of the compassionate presence needed in today's pluralistic world, what advantages, what biases might I carry with me as a person of my religious tradition?

- In terms of the accepting, inclusive presence needed in today's multicultural world, what advantages, what biases might I carry with me as a person of my ethnic/cultural heritage?

A Thumbnail Sketch of the Bennett's Stages of Intercultural Sensitivity

The Bennett model of the pathway to greater cultural sensitivity has six basic stages. Three of these are termed ethnocentric in which one assumes that "the worldview of one's own culture is central to all reality." Three of these are termed ethnorelative in which one assumes that "cultures are only understood relative to one another, that a particular behavior can only be understood within a cultural context." (Milton Bennett, "Towards Ethnorelativism", *Education for the Intercultural Experience* (Intercultural Press, Yarmouth, ME, 1993) In the ethnocentric stages, the experience of cultural difference is threatening. In the ethnorelative stages the experience of cultural difference is non-threatening.

Denial

The first stage of ethnocentrisms is denial. It is basically what it implies. It is a stance in which cultural difference is not part of my world reality, either because I am, in fact isolated from people of other ethnic origins or I have insulated myself against the consciousness that culturally different people exist or the society in which I live has created a segregation of culturally different peoples, thus making it possible not to encounter them at all or encounter them in very stereotypical roles or places.

The major strategy for development of cultural sensitivity is simple and attentive exposure to difference and cultural awareness activities.

Defense

There are basically two forms in which we tend to reduce the threat of otherness.

Denigration: a basically negative evaluation of the other. This is often manifested in attributing negative characteristics to all members of an ethnic group. What helps is the awareness of the inevitability of denigration and of naming it as a progression out of denial and towards greater cultural sensitivity. Supporting the building of self-esteem in persons of minority groups can facilitate development here.

Superiority: a basically overemphasis of the positive evaluation of one's own cultural status. We reduce the threat of cultural difference we experience by implicitly relegating it to a lower status. What helps in this stage is affirming the speaker's culture and then lifting up the equally good qualities of the other culture. Or supporting a greater understanding of the context and value system of the second culture.

Minimization

This stage of cultural sensitivity minimizes the uniqueness of different cultural realities, stressing the nature of cultural similarities. There are two primary ways in which this is done:

Physical universalism. This is a naïve conviction that all people, despite obvious differences, share the same basic characteristics, (such as individual motivation for achievement). These assumed universal characteristics are almost always derived from the native culture of the person making the assertion. What helps here is the evidencing from anthropological and sociological research the significant grounding of human behavior in the context of the society and situation from which the person comes.

Transcendental Universalism. This perspective suggests that all human beings come from the same transcendent or sacred origin; however the supernatural force assumed to overlie these cultural differences is invariably derived from one's own worldview. What helps here is to find a way out of relying on one's own beliefs and assumptions as absolute and to acknowledge affirmatively the pluriformity of beliefs and assumptions that are integral to cultural entities. It is particularly effective to draw resources persons from other cultures.

Acceptance

In this stage one acknowledges, respects and accepts cultural difference as an essential and preferred human condition. One owns the fact that one has a worldview. One's own worldview is seen as culturally (as well as historically, politically, spiritually) determined just as the worldview of the other is culturally determined.

Respect for behavioral difference. All forms of verbal and nonverbal behavior vary across cultures and there is the belief that all forms of behavior are worthy of respect, even if one does not personally support the behavior.

Respect for value difference. Attaining respect for value difference calls for another shift in our orientation to reality. This shift is to see values and assumptions not as things that we possess. Rather to understand that I/we assume things that allow our world to be organized in a certain way.

Adaptation

One begins in this stage to acquire more skills to relating to those of other cultures. Another paradigm shift is possible here. One can see that one does not have or own a culture, but that one engages a culture. Seen in this way one is able to select a culturally appropriate response to a situation different from the one with which one was brought up.

Intentional Empathy – this is based on comprehending or imagining another's perspective. One consciously and temporarily shifts one's worldview and participates in the other's. What is important and what helps is that it acknowledges and respects the possible cultural difference. One may not yet grasp how to handle respectful disagreement.

Pluralism – What is characteristic of this aspect of adaptation is the "internalization by one individual of two or more fairly complete cultural frames of reference. Basically one sustains a natural and abiding empathy for cultural difference. This flows from the reality that cultural differences are integral to one's worldview.

Contextual Evaluation

This stage of cultural sensitivity represents the first form of integration. It must be noted that, in Bennett's scheme, up to this stage of ethnorelativism, difference has not been valued as good or bad, simply different. In this stage one attains the capacity to assess situations using cultural perspectives that have become one's own as the outcome of effective acceptance and adaptation.

Persons in this stage see their identities as including many cultural options, and they can make a choice about these without losing a sense of their identity. Persons can assess the strengths and weaknesses of their own culture. They do not feel the necessity of embracing their own culture in its entirety. They are able to discern the aspects of dominant cultures that sustain oppression without rejecting the entire culture.

Constructive Marginality

In this stage the person owns a personal faith stance (see first paragraph) and an integrated value system refined through personal choice making and reflection on one's interaction in many contexts. His or her identity is articulate and evident. She or he has an ability to empathize with others, balanced by a skill of evaluating within the cultural context. The person has a skill at defining boundaries as well as the ability to be flexible with boundaries. Commitment within pluriformity is typical of constructive marginality.

Self as Journeyer, as pilgrim

- Story of my own journey with a specific other religious tradition: telling the story, naming any stages I detect in the story: from how it was for me in the beginning and how it is for me now.

- How have I changed?

- What new strengths do I bring to new interreligious encounters?

Stages in the process of interfaith dialogue

Coming to appreciate more deeply the truth, goodness and beauty of another faith is a process. Using the experience of people engaged in dialogue, Leonard Swidler of Temple University, in the book, *The Study of Religion in an Age of Global Dialogue*, (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2000) has identified seven stages of genuine dialogue. With these stages we reflect on our own journey.

Stage One: Radical Encountering of Difference

Early encounters with those of other religions are inherently challenging and even threatening as one faces a worldview, a way of interpreting reality and ways of responding that are clearly Other. One soon realizes that this disruption to one's own worldview and ways of responding won't go away, nor will it accommodate to one's own. One may be tempted to withdraw from the situation. The decision to stay engaged moves one into the second stage.

Stage Two: Crossing Over – Letting go and entering the world of the Other

As one makes the decision to engage the world of the Other sincerely one finds oneself called to explore, to learn anew and to reassess one's norms as to adequate and appropriate expressions of values, and to critique one's traditional attitudes. One find that one needs to approach their worldview with openness and a bracketing of my stereotypes and prejudices. As one does this one finds oneself moving into stage three.

Stage Three: Inhabiting and Experiencing the World of the Other

The experience of empathy and interest then expands into a sense of freedom that opens doors to learn many things from this other world: what is of greatest importance, modalities of interaction, what causes suffering to those in this world... As one experiments with integrating ways of thinking and acting, one senses an excitement and a deepening relationship with those of this world.

Stage Four: Crossing back with an expanded vision

The new knowledge one has gained in alternative ways of thinking and acting is now part of one's repertoire as one regains one's sense of belonging in one's own world. One is able to think and act from both perspectives as the context may require of one. One's sense of identity has deepened, has changed, and no matter what choices one freely makes to believe and to act, one can no longer believe that one's former unilateral way of interacting is the only way. One's attitudes and concerns are ever reshaped to hold the Other in view, in relationship.

Stage Five: The Dialogic awakening – A Radical Paradigm shift

One experiences a profound shift in one's worldview as well as one's expanded consciousness of concerns and needs and causes of dysfunction in world realities. One can no longer return to one's former worldview that did not have a place for this Other. Further one is irrevocably shaped to the possibility that there are a plurality of viable worldviews, concerns, and human responses. One senses the interconnectedness of oneself and many/all Others, including Earth and all her needs and potentials.

Stage Six: The Global Awakening – the paradigm shift matures

This stage of deep dialogue opens one to the common ground that underlies the multiple worlds with which one is surrounded. One can perceive that the unique differences essential to these worlds are contained in a field of unity. One embraces an expanding world of communities of life with greater potential for ongoing dialogue and new learning and deepened relationships.

Stage Seven: Personal and Global Transforming of Life and Behavior

One of the most significant transformations that has taken place on this journey is a greater and more encompassing moral consciousness and ensuing practice. The communion that one experiences with all: self, others, Earth is profound. One senses that one's care for oneself instead of being in competition with concerns for the welfare of other realities is integral to the care of the whole. One experiences deeper meaning in relationships and in one's whole life.

Self as facilitator or animator

- My own experience as an adult learner: what approaches most helped me to learn from experience and be open to new experiences?

- Experience I already have in mentoring other adults learning from life experiences and opening selves to new experiences?

- Attitudes and skills I already have in respect to mentoring others:

- Fears and hesitations I have in the role of mentoring another person seeking to better understand and collaborate with a person of another faith. How can I deal with these?

Strategies that support adult learning

Creating a trusting and safe environment
This is important whether the Other is accepting of your faith tradition or is somewhat hostile to your tradition or some aspect of it. Looking at ways this can be accomplished

Telling the story
Listening to the story, helping to sensitively expand the story's context and to reflect back to the speaker, some of his or her key feelings. Seeing the significance of these and ways we do this.

Reflecting on the Story with the speaker
Engaging the speaker in surfacing insights and learnings concerning various aspects of the interreligious encounter

Studying selected learnings in the arena of interreligious dialogue
Studying along with the speaker selected readings in the arena of interreligious dialogue. These expand the insights and learnings the speaker has already acquired through reflection on experience and his/her own prior readings.

Exploring implications of these learnings
Considering with the speaker various implications of the discoveries made above. These may be logical consequences following upon new learnings. These may also suggest thinking outside the present box. They may suggest a conversion of thought or appreciation.

Making applications to the reality we encounter here and now
 The last aspect of the adult learning cycle calls for taking the new insights and the implications they inspire and making applications to one's own life, situation or more global reality. This engenders a commitment to work for a new world reality.

PRINCIPLE
These strategies are applicable in one on one exchanges, informal gatherings and formal gatherings.

About the people with whom I am likely to interact

- Who are people I might engage?

- Walking in their shoes, what most strikes me?

- Arenas/settings where we interact, what might I assume about their history of encounter with those of other faiths?

- Name the resources these very people bring to their own situation

- Using my current insights, "what is needed?" " How can I help?"

Basic Assumptions

A desired outcome of this work on dialogue is deep compassion for the Other. Who is, for me, the Other? It begins with the other persons in my inner circle of family friends, members of my various communities, and extends beyond this to include other persons in ever-greater circles.

The process, Encountering Other Faiths, is developed with the intention of being of benefit to members of religious/spiritual or faith traditions who have an interest in relating to those of other faiths and spiritualities. The following are some assumptions concerning the folks who are interested in an introduction to interfaith dialogue:

1. The participants are likely to be people who know about their own faith, up till the high school level or at least until the time of the ritual of becoming a mature member of the faith community.

2. The participants are likely to be currently in contact with their chosen faith or spiritual community and thus consider themselves involved in the living and learning experiences of their communities.

3. Participants are likely to have grown beyond Fowler's Stage Three of faith and have made some moves to interact with or on behalf of people who are in some ways different from themselves. Interest in Interfaith dialogue evidences a faith level of Fowler's Stage Four.

4. Participants are likely to have commitments and priorities in their lives that demand significant time and energy. At the same time, they are interested enough in effective interfaith encounter to prioritize time for this and have decided to make a commitment to the work involved in the process.

6. Participants are likely to have a wide range of knowledge, from none or a little to quite a bit, of the following: the multireligious diversity in this nation, their city or their local area; the basic tenets and practices of other faiths; current perspectives of their own faith; and the nature and the practices of interfaith dialogue. The format of this process can encompass this range of knowledge.

7. The process used in this model is divided into nine sessions and can be variously re-divided. The time commitment available for this commitment will vary. What is essential is an adequate timeframe for the sessions themselves and some time to prepare for engaging the sessions.

The Encountering Other Faiths series model

The process of "Encountering Other Faiths" has its underpinning in the paradigm of crossing over, entering the world of the other, and then crossing back with an expanded vision. While this paradigm inspires our process, the exposure to interfaith encounter offered in this model is limited. The model prepares individuals for a crossing over and entering the world of the "Other," offers an overview of simple experiences of crossing over and entering the world of the other, provides an experience of shared space with persons of another faith and finally, guides the participants into a debriefing concerning that experience. The model does this in a community setting that nurtures a deepening of one's faith. It encourages deeper insight into and integration of personal interfaith encounters.

Introduction to Workbook for Encountering Other Faiths

1. Key paradigms for supporting good worldviews and patterns of interactions
   - Best practices in communications
   - Modalities of Interfaith Engagement
   - Common Ground
   - Questions for mutual exploration
   - Stages in the Process of Interfaith Dialogue
2. Basic Principles
3. Lesson Plans
4. Readings
5. Facilitator's Guide

Planning Insights

My concrete vision of the ministry of facilitating others in encountering those of other faiths

Dilemmas I see and ways to work through these

Actions I desire to take

My way/style of approach