

# Sharing Our Stories: A Retreat Model for Enhancing Interfaith Literacy and Cultivating Connection, Curiosity, and Courage

Tracy Mehr-Muska

Assistant Director of the Office of Religious and Spiritual Life and University Chaplain  
Wesleyan University

*Abstract: While multi-day interfaith retreats for college students are expensive and ambitious, those centered around personal narratives allow interfaith literacy and civil discourse to flourish because the environment and structure invite students to develop meaningful relationships, build resilience, cultivate curiosity and courage, and grow personally and spiritually.*

*Key Words: interfaith literacy, retreat, resilience, interfaith dialogue, spiritual growth*

## Background

While I am consistently in awe of the compassion, engagement, and intelligence of the students I serve as a chaplain at a secular liberal arts college in New England, I am aware of occasions of religious misunderstanding and bias, the sidelining of spiritual and religious beliefs and practices, and a proclivity to stereotype students of faith. Though my experience is specific to one institution, I doubt these challenges are limited to any certain geography or type of school.

Recognizing these realities, the Office of Religious and Spiritual Life (ORSL) began developing and executing a grant-funded, multi-dimensional initiative with the following overall aim: *to practice, normalize, and deepen civil discourse on campus, increase religious literacy, and hone a sense of purpose through the use of personal narrative informed by one's experiences.*

As described in our grant application, centering personal narratives has several benefits: it is a powerful way to learn about someone else, discover more about ourselves, and develop a deeper knowledge of, and appreciation for, the world around us. In the words of an education module produced by Interfaith America, "Story is a powerful tool for motivating social change," and personal stories have the power to become "inspiring public narratives that convey purpose and vision, and encourage cooperation."<sup>1</sup>

Data show that the use of narrative discourse has proven effective among children in developing metacognitive ability, problem-solving skills, and higher-order thinking,<sup>2</sup> and the sharing of narratives is more persuasive because they are easier to process cognitively.<sup>3</sup> Based on this

---

<sup>1</sup> "Introduction to Interfaith Leadership" (curriculum by Interfaith America and Dominican University), accessed November 13, 2024, <https://www.interfaithamerica.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/06/ILVS-Lesson-3.pdf>.

<sup>2</sup> Rebecca R. Frausel, Lindsey E. Richland, Susan C. Levine, and Susan Goldin-Meadow, "Personal narrative as a 'breeding ground' for higher-order thinking talk in early parent-child interactions," *Developmental Psychology* 57, no. 4 (2021): 521.

<sup>3</sup> Olivia M. Bullock, Hillary C. Shulman, and Richard Huskey, "Narratives are Persuasive Because They are Easier to Understand: Examining Processing Fluency as a Mechanism of Narrative Persuasion," *Frontiers in Communication* 6 (2021): 3.

information, we chose to center personal narratives in our programming to help build community, cultivate resilience, enhance interfaith literacy and curiosity, and invite self-reflection. With generous funding from the Arthur Vining Davis Foundation and Templeton Religion Trust, we are utilizing personal narratives in our programming in various ways, one of which is in student leadership development.

The student leaders of our religious and spiritual communities are on the leading edges of difficult conversations about theological diversity, political engagement, and religious practice. These essential dialogues are complex and exhausting. Because it is essential that student leaders who are engaged in these conversations feel empowered, informed, curious, resilient, and compassionate, we developed the Interfaith Leadership Council.

The Council is designed to facilitate authentic engagement and inspire learning by providing a nonjudgmental, consistent space to share personal narratives that help build connections and cultivate curiosity. The members have committed to meeting regularly for interfaith literacy programs, civic engagement, interpersonal community building, and leadership training. Given their enthusiasm, we wanted to start the academic year with an immersive, engaging retreat experience described below.

## **Program Details**

### *Timing and Schedule*

We chose a weekend early in the fall semester before the academic load began to intensify. We offered one workshop on Friday evening, three on Saturday, and one on Sunday morning. We scheduled the workshops around some of the retreat center's existing yoga and meditation programs to enable students to participate in the center's programs if desired. We scheduled free time on Friday and Saturday nights. We also offered optional religious programs led by the chaplains, including a Shabbat service on Friday, Muslim devotional time on Saturday, and a Christian Visio Divina program on Sunday.

### *Participants*

Twelve students from the Interfaith Leadership Council attended, representing the Muslim, Jewish, Catholic, Protestant, and Mindfulness communities on campus. The Jewish, Muslim, and Christian chaplains facilitated the retreat.

### *Location*

We chose a retreat center less than two hours from the university. In addition to having a beautiful and expansive campus, this center was well known for its yoga, mindfulness, and resilience programming. Our students were among several hundred guests. The center offered three meals daily, miles of hiking trails, a labyrinth, outdoor spaces, a lake for swimming and kayaking, yoga and meditation classes, and resilience programs.

### *Content*

We offered five workshops with the following content:

- Spiritually-grounded Leadership – This chaplain-led workshop was designed to establish and enrich our interpersonal relationships and explore “spirituality” and “religion” through art and conversation.
  - Introductions: We engaged in icebreaker activities including the use of a customized “Thumball” with spiritually relevant questions such as:
    - “Describe a place on campus that feels spiritual to you” and
    - “A time you felt connected to something greater than yourself.”
  - Spirituality and Religion: Students broke into dyads to sort a variety of scenarios into one of three categories: definitely spiritual, unsure, or definitely not spiritual.<sup>4</sup> Scenario examples included:
    - “Khalil goes to the mosque every Friday out of a sense of guilt and obligation” and
    - “Esther wears a necklace with a religious symbol because her mother gave it to her before she died.”As a large group, we then discussed the reasoning for their choices, acknowledged divergences in opinions, and discussed possible frameworks and non-binding criteria for what might be categorized as “spiritual.” We then considered a definition of “religion” in comparison.
  - Personal Spiritual Identity: Students explored and expressed their own spiritual identity and values through art by decorating a blank journal’s cover using decoupage and magazine images, scrapbook paper, markers, and stickers. Afterward, students described the meaning of the images, words, colors, and symbols that they chose.
- Resilience and Leadership – The retreat center offered an evidence-based workshop that employed mindfulness-based practices and was “specifically designed to support greater clarity and resilience, improved situational awareness, better decision making, [and] work/life integration.”<sup>5</sup> This slides-based workshop invited students to consider practices that could enhance their well-being as leaders and students.
- Mindful Leadership – We participated in a guided mindful outdoor hiking experience led by a retreat center facilitator, taking breaks for mindfulness practices and dialogue.
- Leading with Interfaith Literacy – Students and university chaplains from different faith traditions came prepared to share information about their beliefs, practices, and values while exploring how their religious identities shaped their lives in order to increase our collective interfaith literacy and enhance our understanding and mutual respect.
- Leaning into Leadership – Participants identified their core religious/spiritual values and shared how they live by them. The participants also had an opportunity to reflect on the retreat and discuss their learnings.

---

<sup>4</sup> Jamir Dean Meah, “Class 2: Defining Spiritual Autobiography,” CSPL207-01 Spiritual Autobiography: Building Communities Through Interfaith Literacy (workshop exercise, Wesleyan University, Middletown, CT, September 9, 2024).

<sup>5</sup> “RISE,” Kripalu Center for Yoga & Health, accessed November 13, 2024, <https://kripalu.org/content/rise>.

## Findings

### *Value of Personal Narratives for Relationship Development*

Centering personal narratives was a powerful aspect of the retreat and helped students feel connected. Students were honest and vulnerable, and they treated one another's stories and experiences with respect and appreciation. Trust continued to build throughout the weekend, and the students' interactions seemed increasingly more comfortable, casual, and authentic.

Sharing stories was particularly impactful for this diverse group of students because there are few opportunities on campus for students to be engaged on a deep and personal level with people outside their existing social circles or religious communities. One student said this:

Admittedly, I am most comfortable around peers of mine who look like me and who are from similar backgrounds [as] me. This, of course, is not intentional in any way, but is kind of just how I have been socially conditioned. I loved the way this retreat provided an opportunity to act against the grain and seek support and connection with unexpected partners.

After a stressful year locally and globally, the students engaged genuinely in both casual and meaningful conversations and enjoyed activities together such as swimming in the lake and hiking to an overlook to watch the sunrise. One stated, "Because the retreat felt so far from campus in both a geographical and social sense, I was able to connect with new people on a level I wouldn't have been able to (maybe just out of social fear) during a typical weekend on campus."

### *Value of Personal Narratives for Building Resilience and Leadership*

Sharing personal narratives also helped enrich the students' resilience in two specific ways. First, as described above, sharing personal narratives helped build new and meaningful relationships. These new relationships increased the number of supportive and encouraging people in their lives and strengthened the students' existing support systems. Furthermore, because they share similar joys and challenges as religious leaders in their respective communities, these new friends will serve as wise, supportive, and empathetic resources to one another. Having these types of meaningful social connections is an important key to resilience.<sup>6</sup>

Second, these newly formed relationships created contexts where students could share about occasions when they overcame hardships, persevered through difficulty, differentiated themselves, and discovered meaning and purpose as emerging adults. These recognitions helped them discover and acknowledge their existing resilience and inspired their self-esteem.

### *Value of Personal Narratives for Interfaith Engagement, Inquiry, and Learning*

---

<sup>6</sup> Tracy Mehr-Muska, *Weathering the Storm: Simple Strategies to Being Peaceful and Prepared* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2019), 12.

Deep connections built through interpersonal sharing helped inspire trust, allowing curiosity, courage, and proactive inquiry to thrive. For example, students and chaplains shared their deeply-held beliefs and described how their religious identities shaped their lives in a workshop entitled “Leading with Interfaith Literacy,” and one student responded by saying, “Activities are always the most meaningful for me when I hear someone's personal, unequivocal, incontestable story.” Even though it was the most didactic of all our workshops, the centering of personal narrative made the content relatable and engaging, causing it to be rated by the students as the most meaningful workshop of the retreat.

Not only did participants find this workshop meaningful, but they also found it educational. Eleven of the twelve participants reported that the retreat enhanced their understanding of other religious or spiritual traditions, and one student said this:

It encouraged us to be curious. . . . We all got to be experts in sharing our own faith and experience, and at the same time be learners listening to others' faiths and experiences, which I find really beautiful. . . . I liked the feeling that we could keep discussing and asking questions [about religious beliefs and practices] informally after the session.

In addition to the workshop being meaningful and educational, it revealed, for some, a recognition of how little they knew and a preexisting complacency. Several students from outside the Christian tradition admitted that they had no idea that there were any differences between Protestant Christianity and Catholicism, and another student said, “Something that surprised me was how comfortable I was with knowing so little about the faiths around me and never putting in more effort to learn about them.”

This curiosity was a strong motivation to learn and engage, and it invited people to not only recognize the areas of spiritual and theological congruity, but also to actively seek out, identify, and appreciate differences. As a result of the retreat, students reported feeling more courageous and comfortable conversing with others around topics of difference, with 100% of respondents reporting that the retreat increased their comfort with “engaging in dialogue with people of other religious/spiritual traditions about spiritual/religious issues.” One student said, “I . . . gained confidence in my ability to ask questions about others' faiths respectfully and to answer inquiries about my own.”

The students returned to campus with more curiosity and open-heartedness, a renewed energy for dialogue, and new courage and confidence in having conversations around differences. Another student said, “I will be sure to engage in more conversations with others about (seemingly) private topics such as religion which they might actually be open to discuss.”

### *Value of Personal Narratives in Self-reflection, Self-discovery, and Personal Growth*

Inviting students to share their personal narratives necessitated that the students recognize and describe their own beliefs and values. Instead of sharing what they think they are *supposed* to believe or practice, the students shared what it was that they *did* believe and practice, and why. As students were called upon to think deeply about and share how their beliefs and practices inform their worldviews and ways of being, they learned more about themselves and their

relationships with their spiritual or religious traditions. This enabled them to see beyond the religious labels and recognize the vast diversity of faith and practice within and between traditions. One student said, “I got to learn the fundamental beliefs/practices of the different represented faith traditions and had the opportunity to test and expand my understanding of my own religion.” Not only were they learning about others, but they were also learning about themselves.

## **Recommendations and Questions**

While the retreat did meet the objectives, future retreats will likely include:

- More unstructured free time with optional activities and/or guided self-care practices,
- A more private venue closer to campus, with family-style meals for our group,
- Having all workshops facilitated by internal professional staff or student leaders instead of external people,
- Opportunities to sign up for 1:1 time with a chaplain for theological conversation and/or pastoral care, and
- Shorter workshops

The following are some questions to ponder as we plan for our next retreat:

- What are the benefits and drawbacks of incentivizing participation in the retreat, such as offering a stipend?
- Should there be an application process that might help assess students’ interest and capacity to participate in a program that requires such intensity and vulnerability? Who might that inadvertently exclude?
- Should there be opportunities for partial participation if a student cannot attend the whole retreat?
- Should we consider reassessing the participants in eight or twelve months using another assessment tool to see if their learning and discoveries have remained or evolved?
- How might we fund interfaith leadership retreats beyond the grant period?

## **Conclusion**

By centering personal narratives, this retreat met its objectives of developing deep relationships, cultivating resilience and leadership skills, enhancing interfaith learning and engagement, and prompting self-reflection and self-discovery. Every student reported that the overall experience of the retreat was positive, with ten of twelve students giving it the highest rating on a scale of one to five.

One notable outcome of the retreat was the students’ fresh appreciation for engaging with students who were different from them, with several students mentioning how impactful it was to be off campus with students they did not know from their existing religious communities or social circles. Students seemed authentically surprised about how beneficial and enriching it was to spend time with people unlike themselves and to escape the social constructs of campus.

In conclusion, multi-day interfaith retreats for college students are expensive and time-consuming, but retreats that center personal narratives offer unparalleled opportunities for meaningful connection, learning, engagement, and growth.

### **Acknowledgments**

The retreat would not have been possible without the support of the university and funding from a grant from the Arthur Vining Davis Foundation and Templeton Religion Trust. The development of this retreat was a joint effort by the university chaplains: Rabbi David Leipziger Teva; Shaykh Jamir Dean Meah; and the author of this case study, Rev. Tracy Mehr-Muska. We also received invaluable help from our Program Coordinator, Isadora Wilkenfeld.

Tracy Mehr-Muska, D.Min., BCC, serves as a university chaplain at Wesleyan University and is passionate about interfaith literacy and resilience. She is a board-certified chaplain with the Association of Professional Chaplains and is ordained in the Presbyterian Church (USA).