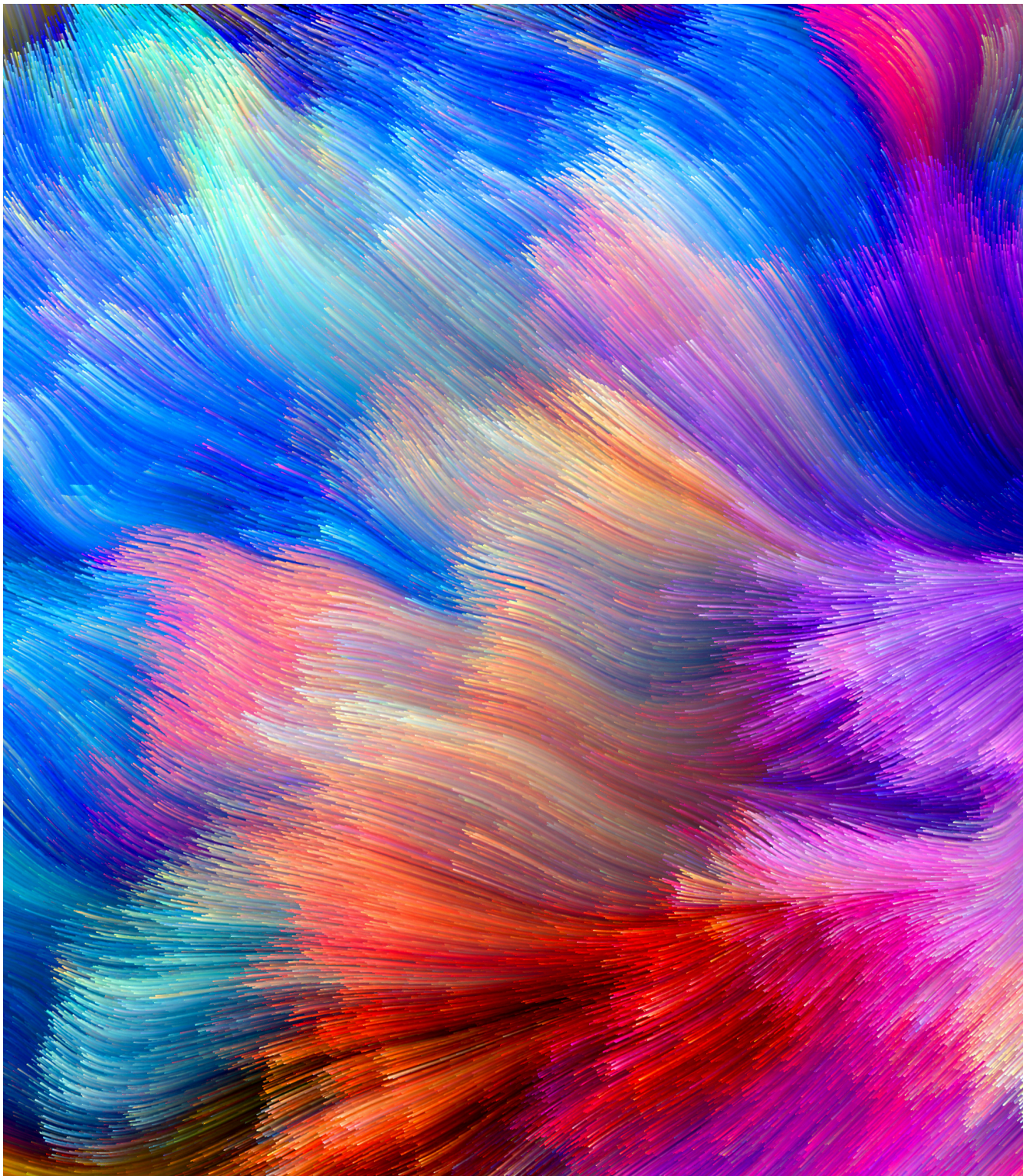
UNFOLDING:

UNIVERSITY CHAPLAINCY IN PRACTICE

ISSUE 2
FEBRUARY 2025



ASSOCIATION FOR CHAPLAINCY AND SPIRITUAL LIFE IN HIGHER EDUCATION

ASSOCIATION FOR CHAPLAINCY AND SPIRITUAL LIFE IN HIGHER EDUCATION

UNFOLDING:

UNIVERSITY CHAPLAINCY IN PRACTICE

ISSUE 2 FEBRUARY 2025

When we, the Co-editors, put out the call for this year's issue of Unfolding, we were already facing a world with war in the Middle East and Ukraine, unrest on college campuses, as well as myriad battles to protect the civil and political rights of vulnerable people in the United States. With Donald Trump's return to the Presidency in January, we are certainly living in turbulent times. As chaplains and spiritual practitioners, we stand in that maelstrom, called to be both prophets and caregivers. Often, we work alone or in small teams. Sometimes, we feel powerless in the face of great need before us. As co-editors, we wanted to craft an issue that facilitated "brave" space to address the concrete needs of our readers. Our vision of a brave space included adjectives such as welcoming, inclusive, diverse and healing. For this issue, we sought actionable wisdom to empower chaplains; case studies and articles that provided insight on how best to create space for people to be brave, practice empathy, and "see" one another's humanity in times of disagreement.

The variety and diversity of submissions that came to us was a true testament of how important it is to cultivate space to share our lived experiences. If there are broad themes that run throughout this issue, they are "relationship" and "dialogue." In this issue, you will find helpful guidance on crafting, maintaining and nurturing relationships with a variety of forms of dialogue.

We begin with Hannah Adams Ingram's case study detailing the response to unrest on campus and her role in facilitating dialogue in a community divided by matters of conscience. Like every article in this issue, themes of dialogue and relationship are the heart of generating constructive responses to turbulent times. Adams Ingram concludes with a reminder that, "every attempt [at chaplaincy] comes with its own questions about positionality, responsibility, and [the] call to justice."

In our second case study, narrative becomes the vehicle for deeper understanding. As Tracy Mehr-Muska explains, "College and university chaplains are often called upon to create spaces for intense and substantive conversations about personal values, spiritual and religious beliefs, and fundamental matters relating to participants' core identities. In these spaces, interfaith learning and civil discourse thrive." Mehr-Muska's case study provides a model off-campus retreat focused on story-telling and interfaith sharing. We have partnered Mehr-Muska's case study with a personal reflective essay by Margaret Alsup, reflecting on her role as chaplain in a

moment of distress. Alsup's narrative exemplifies storytelling and personal reflection as mediums for education. Her story is an invitation to reflect on your own work in similar circumstances.

We conclude the series of case studies with Heather Daughtery centering on a tense exchange during a structured dialogue. Daughtery reflects, not only on the process and skills brought to bear, but also on her role as a Christian and the way our intersectional identities both aid and hamper our work. Like the other case studies, Daughtery leaves us with unanswered questions as we ponder the challenging task of creating space for growth as well as tending to the needs of students.

We also asked for creative expressions that give voice to the role of chaplaincy in turbulent times. Alexander Levering Kern offers us an astute article on the role of art as an avenue for chaplaincy. He challenges us to consider the line between "comfort" and "challenge" inherent in the work of chaplaincy and offers a variety of avenues to explore crafting "brave space." Kern closes his article with a selection of his own poems that bear witness to the powerful work of spiritual care.

In his article, David Dorsey shares experiences facilitating dialogues that move land to the center of relationship. Chaplains, he notes, "are called on to connect the dots, read the times, be truthful in the fuller history we tell; to do justice and love mercy; to consider the facts and still choose hope." Dorsey's practice of "Barefoot Dialogue," reminded us of the healing work of our Indigenous siblings, bringing us closer to an understanding of our place and land.

The issue concludes with Valerie Bailey's book review of *Blessings for Your Students: Prayers for Interfaith Communities in Higher Education,* by Janet Fuller. She guides us through Fuller's text and the promise it holds as a resource for religious life professionals in diverse contexts.

As you read this year's issue of Unfolding, we hope that you are drawn into the conversation with each author, pondering what is left unfinished. If relationship and dialogue are the themes woven throughout, then we hope you have entered into conversation with each author in a way that deepens your engagement with your own work.

We must conclude this introduction with our profound gratitude. Each time we hit an obstacle, we were met with kindness, help, and encouragement. We had an amazing roster of peer-reviewers and cheerleaders. We offer profound thanks to Tauseef Akbar, Nathan Albert, Heather Daugherty, Joel Harter, and Stephanie McLemore. We are grateful to Alex Miller-Knaack for walking us through the process of putting this complex and beautiful journal together.

Peace & Blessings,

Liz & Preeta

Elizabeth Hakken Candido is an ordained Presbyterian (USA) Pastor who has spent her career working in interfaith and multi-faith landscapes. She serves as College Chaplain and Director of Religious Life at Kalamazoo College in Kalamazoo, MI. An essayist and fiction writer, Liz's work has appeared in a variety of publications including Sojourners, Presbyterian Outlook, and Psychology Today.

Preeta M. Banerjee, Ph.D. serves in Babson College's Office of Belonging and Inclusion as Associate Director for Spiritual Life. She draws on over 25 years of experience as a business school professor, corporate executive, life coach and higher education chaplain to bring together spirituality, community, innovation and entrepreneurship. Her practice is rooted in bhakti, gyan, raj and karma yoga.

Campus Table: A Case Study on Cross-Campus Dialogue

Hannah Adams Ingram
Director of Religious Life and College Chaplain
Franklin College

Abstract: *In this case study, the chaplain reflects on their role and response to the Hamas attack in Israel in 2023. They serve a small, regional college with a student body that has different political views, though political conversations are not often at the forefront of the campus community. This case study explores how such a context resulted in a different engagement with the events in the Middle East than institutions with more public demonstrations.*

Keywords: *Israel-Hamas, dialogue, Middle East, cross-campus partnerships, civic engagement*

Context

In March 2022, I joined a group of faculty members and counselors to provide a space of learning about what was happening between Ukraine and Russia. Reflections after this event lauded the cross-campus partnership that blended education and attention to mental/emotional well-being in the face of difficult topics. Buoyed by the success of the event, I worked directly with the Dean of the College and the Dean of Students to design Campus Table, an event over lunch where people from all roles on campus would be invited to practice talking about difficult topics in hopes that we would learn skills for dialogue in this laboratory setting, as well as establish a norm on campus that when we need to talk—we could do so at Campus Table. This dream was part of a reimagining of what was historically held as chapel time in the campus schedule. We launched Campus Table in Fall 2022, and soon enough, it was time to use this format to address another global conflict.

In October 2023, campuses across the country grappled with the Hamas attack in Israel and Israel's subsequent response. The students at our small, regional liberal arts college in the Midwest raised questions in the classroom and in social settings but did not organize large-scale protests in the same way as students at other, larger institutions. Still, there was a small number of informal student requests for the institution to respond in some way.

Because of the difference in context of our college campus, my advice as the chaplain was to take the time to be thoughtful about how best to accompany the campus community in their journeys to make sense of global conflict and its relationship to individual and collective values, beliefs, and identity of the campus. As a white chaplain convicted by anti-racism training and the Characteristics of White Supremacy Culture collected by Tema Okun, I worried that the temptation to act urgently on a matter that the institution had not previously engaged with could cause more harm than good in the hope of being perceived as morally good.[1] I am not suggesting

[1] "CHARACTERISTICS." n.d. WHITE SUPREMACY CULTURE. https://www.whitesupremacyculture.info/characteristics.html.

that silence is the right course of action in times of injustice, but rather, I am describing a commitment to humble reflection on what work we are called to and when. This answer will vary from campus to campus dependent on mission, demographics, and previous work.

Specifics

The format we had designed for Campus Table went as follows:

- As people entered the room, they were met with an invitation to get food and to find seats. Faculty and staff were asked to spread out amongst students.
- Each session, I would welcome everyone and establish the goals of the event.
- Each session, there would be 15 minutes for a couple invited faculty and staff members to establish a shared context in the room with some information about the topic from their differing disciplines.
- After this, each table would be invited to have small-group conversations that ranged from 4-8 people. The reflection guide they were given contained questions from five different angles with an invitation to start wherever those around the table wanted to start. This allows people from different experience levels to share at their own comfort level.

We had previously used this format to explore ethical consumerism, the good life, community living, wellness culture, and artificial intelligence. Topics are intentionally selected for the potential to have clearly different views and perspectives pertaining to them without being easily partisan divided. In other words, it is essential to the format of Campus Table to have hot topics that might stir passionate disagreement without being about to stereotype someone's potential view based on their political or social leaning. In this way, the community can practice truly listening across difference without turning opinions into straw man arguments based on the hyper-polarization we are experiencing in the United States.

I gathered a small team to consider this format to discuss what is happening in Gaza. This team included a faculty member from political science, religion, and history, in addition to a professor emeritus of history that focused on the Middle East and a staff member from our diversity and inclusion office. I asked this group about what our campus needs most this moment and what it would take to get there. Because our campus is not always high on political/social engagement, and because of concern that students were getting facts only from limited social media accounts, this group agreed that what the campus needed even before dialogue was information and guidance for how to keep seeking trustworthy information.

We decided at that time to address campus with a two-part invitation. First, the campus was invited to an information session where each campus expert had 10-15 minutes to offer a perspective on how we can make sense of what's going on in the Middle East. As chaplain, I introduced this event and served as the main host, but I did not offer my own presentation, instead focusing on helping the other presenters really distill such complex information into something helpful for a student body that is largely unversed in the topic. My main work in this was as coach, supporter, and caregiver throughout a heavy task.

Second, and marketed hand-in-hand with the information session, was the invitation to Campus Table, which would serve as the chance to dialogue with others about what they were learning. I made small shifts to the format of Campus Table given the sensitive nature of this topic at this time. First, instead of starting with 10-15 minutes of shared context building by faculty and staff members, we decided to show an informational video at the beginning of the event. Our team had already shared their information at the previous session, but we needed to make sure to provide context for people who came only to the second event. I was proud of the team that decided they would rather show a video that day than speak again, as they made that decision for pedagogical reasons over any sense of academic ego, which might have pushed for more airtime.

This led to another slight shift in format—we asked specific faculty and staff members to serve as facilitators of each table conversation to help make sure the conversation did not go off the rails and fall prey to religious or cultural attacks. We had a couple of reports of discriminatory comments made in classrooms, and we wanted to take care to encounter challenging conversations without sacrificing security and respect. The team that led the information session anchored most of the individual tables, but we also drew on student affairs professionals to cover other tables.

Takeaways and Ongoing Questions

About 50 people came to this Campus Table session. After the event, I asked some of the faculty and staff members present to send me a reflection of what happened at their tables. These are their direct reflections, shared with permission:

a. *The conversation at my table was well rounded in receiving a faculty, staff, and student perspectives on the issues. The faculty felt that there needed to be more conversation/involvement on campus surrounding this conflict to not continue the silencing of the conflict existing. The staff expressed feeling fear of the ongoing conflict and what is to come, and the detriment to one's mental health. And the students concluded in wanting to make more of a conscious effort to show their support in recognition of the conflict. While there were differing views, everyone was respectful and appreciated hearing one another's perspective.*
b. *Our table first focused on what students had heard about the conflict in Gaza- were they following it on social media, the news, discussing the situation in classes? We then had an interesting discussion comparing their access to information about Gaza to their access to information about the war in Ukraine. Students noted that they simply heard more about Ukraine than Gaza and had interesting reasonings why- US allies, US/Russian aggression, charismatic leadership. There were also interesting comments discussing how they could see an end to the war in Ukraine but how the situation in Gaza seemed to have no solution.*
c. *It was so lovely. It was the most engaging conversation I've had at Campus Table, which I don't think I would have expected given the topic and just how complex it is. The students led the conversation, and I can't get over how precious and sincere they were. We spent a lot of time talking about social media and the role it*

plays, as well as US news sources/politics and often their bias toward Israel. Also that helpless feeling of what can we possibly do? And it being far away, easier for us to ignore, though not because we don't care. Someone talked about the difference between news reports vs. citizens of Palestine or Israel who post on TikTok who are there, living it. They wished they talked about more things like this in class.

d. *I asked my table to explore whichever of the prompts spoke to them. Several spoke to identity while others spoke to their experience and knowledge. This fostered opportunity for each member of the table to relate how they felt connected to Israel-Hamas Conflict. The discussion ranged from personal experiences in the area and knowing Israelis and Palestinians to what they heard on the news and knowing Jews and Muslims. Much discussion centered on how they received their news (mostly social media). The discussion wound through how they might help (donations to non-aligned organizations) and how we might find a resolution that honors both sides.*
e. *As I mentioned after the gathering, our conversation was really great! There was candor and vulnerability. There was a great mix of students, faculty, and staff coming together to try to grow in understanding and empathy! We wrestled with some hard things together and did it with respect. All of us made sincere commitments to keep learning and growing as we moved on from that hour.*

I was encouraged by these reflections because of the work we did to build up to this event, both specifically with the information session and more broadly with the construction and investment in the Campus Table series generally. Talking over shared bread is not a new idea in religious circles by any stretch of the imagination, and yet, it still proves to be an effective way to ask people to engage with one another across difference. While I knew doing this series over lunch would be helpful on a philosophical level, it was actually a pragmatic choice born out of student complaint that they could not attend events in the "free" 11 o'clock hour without missing time for lunch. So, we provided lunch so they could come.

It will come as no surprise to my higher ed colleagues that the ongoing question and challenge in such work is one of capacity—we know we can provide meaningful content, but our campuses are often over-scheduled and optional programming is hard to embrace when you are tired, overwhelmed, or just burnt out. Most of my chaplaincy work currently pushes people to more rest and more space for the sake of spiritual well-being, so there is a constant give-and-take involved in asking anyone to participate in chapel programming. That is why Campus Table was created as a cross-campus initiative between academic and student affairs, rather than living simply in religious life.

Lastly, I continue to ponder my role on a campus that is not always activated as hotly about social and political issues. I have deep commitments as a person of faith, but I am also deeply committed to my vocational responsibility to accompany folks in their own journey of integrating faith and values and their place in the world without imposing my own. It is an honor

to do this work, but every attempt comes with its own questions about positionality, responsibility, and call to justice.

Rev. Dr. Hannah Adams Ingram has served as the Director of Religious Life and College Chaplain at Franklin College for over seven years. She is an ordained minister in the United Church of Christ and author of *The Myth of the Saving Power of Education* (2021).

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."[1]

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

[1] "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.
[2] 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.
[3] 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.[4] 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."[5] 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.

---

[4] 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).

[5] "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.[6]

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

---

[6] 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).

Encountering the Divine Through a Meal and Dialogue: A narrative reflection

Margaret Alsup
College Chaplain & Director of Service
Lyon College

For college chaplains or religious leaders, chaos is where some of our most beautifully divine work happens. We might not enjoy all the ways our bodies and hearts store such experiences, but on a vocational level, we know that in turbulent times the divine is active within our community. In these times, it is our call to point out how the Divine is on the move and invite others to encounter the work of the Divine.

The work of creating space for people to experience the Divine, and to engage with the emotions that come with tension, can be challenging. Being a non-anxious presence isn't easy to put into practice. In fact, at many points I have found myself presenting like I am calm on the outside while internally, I'm screaming. In those moments, I remember to steady myself and breathe. I connect to the moment and to my surroundings, rooting myself in the present. And in doing so, I am able to find a deeper calm that allows me to face what is before our community.

As spiritual practitioners, we must ground ourselves before beginning the work of creating space for others. Being calm allows me to be open to the Divine as well as open to the reactions of the community. I am able to see students and faculty, to hear their pain or joys, and to offer up space for the dialogue, healing, and learning. It is a vulnerable and treasured place to hold in a community, one that brings a unique lens to the landscape of learning.

One such moment sticks out to me. It was soon after I arrived on campus and I was still getting my bearings as chaplain. Naively, I assumed I had it all figured out and was ready to address the concerns of our campus. I was not ready for what was to come.

On a crisp, fall day I arrived at the office and was asked by the Dean of Students if I'd made my way to the chapel or had seen what had occurred. I told them I had not yet made my way to that side of campus and they instructed me to join them on a walk. When we arrived at the steps of the chapel, the doors had been vandalized, covered in spray paint messages of hate, bigotry, and racial slurs against Jewish and Black community members.

I was unsure of what we would do to address this concerning and shocking discovery. Thankfully the dean took charge, calling in housekeeping and maintenance to begin the clean-up process. We met with Campus Safety to review cameras on campus and try to identify who was responsible. There were conversations about calling the local authorities or the proper protocol for the follow-up process with students.

My role was to provide support to our staff as they began the clean-up process and to work on a communications response to students. I was available for students who saw the vandalism and helped them process the experience. As it became clear that my plans for the workday were shifting, I shifted my mindset from problem-solving mode into pastoral care and support mode.

As I cared for others, the maintenance team stripped and repainted the doors as quickly as possible. In fact, they were able to do so before the majority of campus knew what had occurred.

In the aftermath of the cleanup, we were able to identify who the people were who had vandalized the chapel. Relieved that the vandalism had been removed and the chapel doors were back to their natural state, I wondered what to do next. As a community that prides itself on being small and connected, we had to face the reality that two of our own could do such a hate-filled thing. The vandalism left our community with many questions. How could we allow this to happen? Did others know they were going to do this and not speak up? Many students felt betrayed. Others felt rage and sadness. There was great heartache as we wrestled with this reality. The questions grew and stirred among students and faculty alike as they sat in my office. In time, I realized all the questions were becoming variations on the same one: What could lead to such hate in our community?

The immediate response was standard for the academic world, sending an email to the community stating that this is not acceptable behavior consistent with our honor and social codes. Student Life and the Dean of Students staff also discussed how the images and language used were hate speech and caused harm and hurt within our community. The dean let staff know that the vandals would be held accountable for their actions.

As the administration went about their business handling accountability, it was my task to create space for the community to process the event. I knew that sharing a meal with others helps lower anxiety and opens people—creating a place for vulnerability to be experienced and wisdom to be shared.

Our campus, while affiliated with the Presbyterian Church USA, is located in the south in what some refer to as the Bible Belt. It is a heavily Southern Baptist-influenced area, but there are small pockets of Reformed and progressive Christian communities. The closest non-Christian faith community is two hours away. But nestled in the foothills of the mountains, there is our institution, a small progressive liberal arts college.

The majority of our student body is Southern Baptist, with Roman Catholic affiliation a close second. We have numerous Christian-based student groups and while there aren't any official non-Christian student organizations, we do have Jewish, Muslim, and Buddhist students. What makes our campus unique is that most student groups provide weekly meals. Students, no matter their religious background, are welcome to the meals and programs. Several students will attend every group just for the food and fellowship.

The Christian season of Lent is a time of fasting, penitence and holy introspection and it was upon us in the aftermath of the vandalization. Knowing that food was a good motivator for our students and that we observe Christian seasons on campus, my office decided that Lent would be a perfect trial period for intentional programming. During Lent, we met once a week for a meal and study. We set up smaller round tables where six community members could sit. We sent an invitation to the campus and posted flyers to advertise the program. The goal for the meals was to create a space where students could share, learn, and grow through conversations and grow to appreciate those who were different from them.

Each Christian student group on campus took a week and had their leaders guide the discussion. While this was a Christian observance, our non-Christian students were welcomed to join, and

many did. We shared a simple soup and salad meal and dug into *Fear of the Other: No Fear in Love* by William Willimon. My office selected this book because it takes a hard look at what Christ meant when he called us to love the others among us. It is a book rooted in biblical teaching and reshapes what love can look like, calling for us to love the other for who they are without asking them to conform or become like us. It also offers up some concrete, tangible ways that people can practice love and welcoming others without disregarding differences.

During the first weekly gathering and meal, it was awkward and there was a lot of silence. Students sat with those they knew; there wasn't much mixing of the social groups. As the weeks progressed and relationships developed, conversation bloomed and there was mixing and shifting of seats. We got to know one another through the various meals. We went from discussing which soups reminded us of our childhood, or which one reminded us of our grandmother, to asking about where we grew up and what life was like for those different from us. By the end of our time, we shared ways we had seen love and grace extended on our campus in the season after such destruction. Students and community members got to know one another and see one another a little more clearly.

When the season of Lent was complete, we returned to our regular programming, yet students were craving that weekly connection. They sought one another out to continue this time of growing in relationship and learning. The following semester, when we returned to campus for the fall, we brought back the meals and lessons. However, this time we met once a month and discussed current topics in the new cycle. While there were new members in our community this round, there were plenty of familiar faces.

Returning participants led the way on building relationships and having authentic discussions on matters of life and faith. The awkwardness didn't linger as it had in the beginning. The foundations of honesty, respect, and care were already there. Students were able to jump into relationships from the past spring like no time or space had occurred between them. New students were welcomed into the community much more quickly than the previous year. Our campus felt the impact of this space, where they could share opinions and respect one another, and this time around, it felt almost second nature in our community's DNA.

After that first Lenten season, the students stepped up to lead future conversations and lunches. They went from not talking to one another to requesting certain topics they wanted to dig deeper into with one another. While the meals have changed days and meeting times, this has become a highlight for our community and a tradition. The soups might have been replaced with pasta or other hearty dishes. But the thing that kept this group of students going was the connection to one another and to the Divine. They seek it out and they find ways to continue to live in relationship with one another.

The students and community have gone from an awkward, mostly silent, group, to one that seeks out tough or hard conversations to learn with and from one another. Students have learned firsthand how faith and life are joined together and that one must live the principles of their faith—not just talk about it in the abstract. And when we do talk about difficult subjects, we need to do so with others, not just those who think or believe like us. It was a true gift to our community during a season of hate and turmoil. And it was something that opened our campus to healing and moving forward.

It seems simple enough now, looking back. A meal and conversation. Gathering around food, sharing stories and praying together, brought a community closer by developing deeper relationships. These practices allow space to be vulnerable with our emotions and to draw connections to fellow community members. Through time, the repetition of weekly meals and conversations, allowed us to deepen our sense of connection to one another and to the Divine.

I'm not sure if young, naive Chaplain Maggie would have dreamed of such a reality for her community. I would certainly not wish hate or turmoil on anyone. This experience, however difficult it was in the moment, opened the door for us to create something for our community that hadn't been there before—the space for authentic relationships to thrive. We shifted campus culture to share our opinions and beliefs with others openly. Students felt empowered to explore difficult subjects together moving forward. While this hasn't solved all our campus problems, it did reframe how we handle conflict and challenges when they arise.

As we look ahead to the uncertainty and transitions in higher education and in the political world, one thing is for certain, change will bring challenges for our communities. Some change will be good. Some change will not be good. When my community is faced again with a tumultuous time, I will remember these students and this experience. I will look to them as my example of ways to welcome vulnerability and connection. I know I will be changed by those I encounter and by the Divine—that the community will not remain the same and will be moved to change for the better.

Reverend Margaret Alsup has served as the College Chaplain and Director of Service at Lyon College for eight years. They are an ordained minister in the Presbyterian Church USA and author of Fresh Outlook Bible Studies: Sex and the Bible.

Unlikely Friends – Healthy or Harmful?

Heather Gerbsch Daugherty
University Minister
Belmont University

Abstract: This case study looks at a conversation that happened as a part of the university's Unlikely Friends programming. It questions how we make space for students to share deeply and also to make space for difference in the conversation.

Keywords: *dialogue, difference, discomfort, conflict resolution, conversation*

In Spring 2024, our office along with our Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion office, piloted a program called "Unlikely Friends." This program brought together a cohort of 32 students over four weeks to explore two basic questions: How do students learn to live together and build community across meaningful difference without shedding their most basic beliefs? What conversations and skills can help them to maintain the mental and cultural space necessary to encounter others who believe and act very differently than they do? Unlikely Friends included shared meals as well as large and small group conversations to teach skills for active listening, building empathy, and relating to people from different backgrounds, belief systems, and lived experiences. The cohort experience culminated in a closing session where students were broken up into random groups and given topics to discuss such as "Race in America," "Religion in America," and "Gender Roles." After an hour of discussion, the group came back into a large group to debrief their discussions.

One vocal student made a statement expressing their belief that many of the problems we face today in America and in the church are because of missionary work and the inherent colonization that comes with it. That statement sat in the middle of the room for almost a full minute of silence. My co-facilitator and I sat quietly not wanting to immediately interject and try to "fix" the tension. Eventually, another student spoke up quietly and timidly, sharing that their family are missionaries in Thailand where they were raised and that they hoped one day to return as a missionary to tell people the good news of Jesus. These two statements were the start of an intense discussion not often had at our Christian school about missionary work.

About 1/3 of the students in the cohort were from a non-Christian tradition or of no faith affiliation and several of them told of being the "object" of missionary work. One of these students asked the missionary student: what if what you are talking about isn't good news to me? The missionary student responded with their understanding of why it was okay: If one has this deep treasure that changes the course of their life now and for eternity and did not share it with others, what kind of friend would they be?

The conversation ended due to the time constraints of our meeting, but there was a palpable unease in the room as the group wondered whether or not they had been able to truly make space for all voices and beliefs in their conversation. My co-facilitator and I were not sure either and

ended this final session of our cohort wondering whether our program had created the brave space of belonging we had hoped to cultivate.

I was especially concerned about our missionary student as their viewpoint seemed to be in the minority in the discussion. I wondered if they felt hurt that I, the Christian chaplain, had not defended their point of view. My co-facilitator and I decided that I would send an email to check in. I wrote an email thanking them for their vulnerability and willingness to continue in a conversation that was obviously very personal and challenging. I also offered to meet if they wanted to talk about things more. I received a reply from them the same day telling me that the conversation had reminded [them] of the good news [God] has for [them] and had given them the chance to obey [God]. From this email and a quick personal interaction, it was affirmed that this student had appreciated the opportunity to have such a deep and difficult conversation and that though their viewpoint was not in the majority they had been able to stand up for themselves and share beliefs that were very important to them.

As I look back upon the discussion that evening I am left with two takeaways and one remaining question:

1. **Students have the ability and desire to deal with deep complexity if given the space and context to do so.**
   The goal of Unlikely Friends is to create spaces in which students can take the time to wrestle with the complexity of another person's humanity. This is difficult to do in a single class session or event, but something that can happen over time when a culture of listening and empathy is created. We are so quick to jump to conclusions and make a firm statement as opposed to dealing with the complexity of the person in front of us. This particular situation made me ask if we can equip students to walk into all spaces in this way. What is required of those who create such spaces? How do we help students to see the value in this kind of interaction?

2. **It is not our job to remove the discomfort students encounter in difficult conversations.**
   My initial instinct when things became tense was to rush in and smooth things over, trying to placate all of the students involved by finding some kind of happy medium on which we all could agree. However, the format of Unlikely Friends called for something different and ALL of us sat in the discomfort of that space. In the end, no one could say that they had "won" the conversation, but all people could say that they had the chance to hear the stories of another and to be heard by their cohort. We did not leave that evening with things solved and tied up in a bow, but we left having encountered difference in a real way. This is more realistic to our everyday interactions, and when we as the "adults" in the room move to immediately calm the discomfort, we are taking away experiences that will serve our students in their real-life encounters with difference.

3. **Are there things on which we can't agree to disagree?**
   At the end of one of our Unlikely Friends sessions we ask this question and get very different answers. Are there issues, situations, and viewpoints that are incompatible and negate the opportunity for relationship? I simultaneously find myself answering yes and

> no, considering issues of power and privilege. I wonder what it looks like to make space for people to learn, to grow, and to be changed by encountering someone who challenges their preconceived biases and notions about people with particular identities. I also wonder about the ethics of intentionally placing students in interactions with people who question their humanity and right to exist, particularly in matters of ethnicity, sexuality, and religion. Am I placing students in harm's way by putting them into these conversations or does the opportunity for students to be impacted by the thoughts and experiences of others warrant the risks we are taking?

Much of the work we do in higher education generally, and in chaplaincy specifically, is to help students to prepare for life after graduation and I believe that the work of Unlikely Friends should be seen in this same light. Students will inevitably come into contact with people every day who question their humanity and right to exist. In Unlikely Friends, students learn to express themselves, to listen well, and to discern when to speak and when to hold something in abeyance in a setting where there is support and guidance from trusted mentors. These skills will serve students well when they inevitably face challenging conversations and interactions in unsupported environments. Learning this during their time on our campuses will give them the confidence and resilience they will need to face difficult and uncomfortable situations in the future. Knowing this, I believe the risks taken in Unlikely Friends have benefits that will be evident long after a student's time in the program.

Heather Gerbsch Daugherty has served university communities for over two decades, most recently at Belmont University. University chaplaincy gives her the opportunity to journey with students as they explore issues of faith, vocation, and navigating the world with intention. She is a candidate for Holy Orders in the Episcopal Church.

Barefoot Dialogue: Centering Land in Human Relating

David Dorsey
Multifaith Chaplain
Oberlin College & Conservatory

Abstract: *Barefoot Dialogue is an experiment in human and land relating that underscores the benefits to both human and non-human species when choosing to center land. Utilizing the definition first proposed by author, ecologist, forester, and conservationist Aldo Leopold, in his "Land Ethic," land includes all non-human species. Here, the author contends that species benefit in human and land relating where both are seen as interwoven—intrinsically tied. Now in its twelfth year, Barefoot Dialogue has fifteen year-long dialogue groups at its Oberlin location and continues to draw data in real time that confirms centering land increases human curiosity, fosters stronger mental health, and positively affects human behavior with nature.*

Keywords: *barefoot, barefoot dialogue, interfaith dialogue, multifaith, vulnerability, land, nature, trust, belonging, safety, courage, curiosity, mental health*

When despair for the world grows in me
and I wake in the night at the least sound
in fear of what my life and my children's lives may be,
I go and lie down where the wood drake
rests in his beauty on the water, and the great heron feeds.
I come into the peace of wild things
who do not tax their lives with forethought
of grief. I come into the presence of still water.
And I feel above me the day-blind stars
waiting with their light. For a time
I rest in the grace of the world, and am free.[1]

Americans in the United States are more divided today than at any time in modern history.[2] Scarcely can we find a topic that brings people together—anything that unites. On this side of the 2024 US presidential election, futurists project that the balance in numbers across demographics point to a stalemate that will be with us for some time, maybe generations. Particularly notable are the vastly different perspectives held, in even numbers, among young people, ages 18-30, where there reflects a growing gap across gender identities. Whether Americans are looking from within or people of other nations looking at the United States, "we must reach back to the Depression or the civil war to find periods of US history where the country has been more divided. Isolationism is at levels unseen in seventy years of scientifically rigorous survey research."[3] And all of this while a collective resolve to care for the very planet that cradles our

future appears missing. Natural disasters, more common and ruinous than at any point since tracking, seem endless.

Interestingly, there are indications that nature-based organizations like *iNaturalist* may have a niche all their own. Setting aside the politically charged topic of climate change, this online nature identification website is uniquely drawing from all sectors of the public and has widely captured the natural imagination of every generation, "teaching humans how to get along."[4] This from a New York Times article, "Can Humans Find Common Ground? Sure. Just Start with Sea Slugs."[5]

What if the very act of caring for nature, putting land first, has the power to deepen our sense of wonder? Make us kinder, more just people? What if *landkind* is humanity's best, last hope. Not just to survive, but thrive. This is the stuff of chaplaincy.

Across traditions, chaplains are called to bring people together; to listen, observe, and interpret; to extend care, offer blessings, to forgive and teach forgiveness; to love and steward our planetary home on which all species are dependent; to bring wisdom to bear, to lift the ultimate. To know what matters most, what comes first. Chaplains on today's college and university campuses are called on to connect the dots, read the times, be truthful in the fuller history we tell; to do justice and love mercy; to consider the facts and still choose hope. For these callings and more, the practice of dialogue is beneficial.

Multifaith Chaplaincy and Dialogic Engagement

We can take encouragement in the number of dialogue initiatives popping up of late, particularly in higher education. And while there are clear distinctions made between the various models, one program to the next, the community agreements across models tend to resonate. Large and small, these programs are like siblings of an ever-growing family system, sharing similar traits, holding points of distinction. As with siblings, practitioners of distinct models can be tempted to compete, but we are a better reflection on the dialogic engagement we offer when we choose to learn from one another.

Through dialogue, especially sustained models (constructed around the same group meeting repeatedly over a period of time), we have learned that dialogic engagement is a practice where Chaplains can:

- Serve as hosts, extending hospitality and generosity;
- Distribute power and privilege more fairly, widening access;
- Model multipartiality and multiperspectivity in interfaith and intrafaith engagement;
- Lead with listening and place value on storytelling;
- Invite participants to volunteer identities as they choose, careful never to assume;
- Lift sacred texts from diverse religions; elevating curiosity and learning;
- Prioritize safety so that courage can follow; choose vulnerability that engenders trust; and
- Teach skills that, over time, spill easily into our larger communities of relating.

These are some of the contributions that Barefoot Dialogue at Oberlin College and Conservatory, our sustained dialogue model on campus, have made to student life and the larger community, including faculty and staff, alumni, trustees, and town residents. There is one element, unique to Barefoot Dialogue, that has proven beneficial and is increasingly at the heart of how we define Barefoot at Oberlin–centering land.

Addressing a superiority that humans have historically carried in their relationship with nature, Aldo Leopold, an early pioneer in environmental ethics and wilderness conservation, proposed a "land ethic" that invites humans to be in relationship *with* land rather than *on* land. Leopold's "land ethic simply enlarges the boundaries of the community to include soils, water, plants, and animals, or collectively: the land."[6] In that spirit, Barefoot, when centering "land," includes all non-human species, from the depths of the ocean to planetary systems beyond our knowing. Facilitators and participants in Barefoot Dialogue find centering land inspiring–wisely and wildly beneficial.

Barefoot Dialogue

An experiment in human and land relating, *Barefoot Dialogue* is a vulnerability-based model of structured conversation, sustained over time, between two or more persons who openly engage across self-identified differences—fostering integrity, striving to draw meaning, seeking clarity in their relation with land and place so that they can thrive in natural and human communities.

When Barefooters are asked to locate the magic they experience in Barefoot Dialogue, the responses vary widely. Is it the intentionality in greeting each participant when they arrive as though nothing else is happening except their arrival? Or maybe that participants gather for dialogue in the home of their host, a faculty or staff member who serves a home-prepared meal, carefully following the food restrictions requested, almost seamlessly? Or surely, it's the people. Might it be the facilitators offering coffee or tea with each participant, one-on-one and between dialogue weeks, to foster a deeper connection? Perhaps it's the opening salutes that seem to evoke a certain awe, delight, even laughter–almost like toasts that recognize people and species beyond the immediate circle? Or is it when we revisit the ground tools, one by one, naming the commitments aloud that bind the participant group? Might it be the carefully curated, peer-relevant centerpieces that facilitators craft for their group as a starting point for the dialogue? Or perhaps it is the parting words that remind participants of the joy and challenges in sustaining relationships across difference; and also, that no matter the depth of disagreement, it is their resolve to be in relationship where courage expands. For facilitators and faculty and staff members, might it be the intentional, confidential conversation immediately after the dialogue when the participants have left for the evening? Or could it be the language that evolves with students in this work? With fifteen to twenty groups in a given year, is there a language that unites across the many differences? Or maybe it's as simple as the widely diverse composition of groups? Students, going back and forth about what stands out for them, often suggest that it's not any one part, but rather it is the combination of all the parts. For participants whose involvement

and responsibilities grow as they become facilitators, then fellows to coordinators, the role land plays in human dialogue stands out as unique and particularly beneficial in challenging times.

Barefoot Dialogue, now in its twelfth year at Oberlin, contends that excluding nature in human discourse is costing human and non-human species more than a dying planet. It is blinding us to one another. What we do not learn to observe and consider in nature, we are limited to see and understand in one another.

Increasingly, our learning spaces and classrooms are indoors, where the outdoors serves largely as a passage to the next indoor space. I am reminded of words written by a second-year dialogue participant, halfway through their four-year journey, grieving the lack of outdoor relating on campus. They write, "You keep asking me about my relationship with land, but I do not know her."[7]

For chaplains, this is a problem. Tracing the early days of most any tradition, we see a holistic understanding that lifts the sacredness in all of nature and the intrinsic bond that holds humans and nature inseparable. Rabbis teach us that the wilderness speaks and it is there the voice of God can be heard—where the Torah is revealed. Christian priests point to Jesus in the wilderness for forty days, a place of testing and discernment, where he was sorely tempted and the angels waited on him. Muslims face Mecca for daily prayers, facing the wilderness in Paran, the site where Ishmael settled. In Hindu life, the great Yogis journey to the Himalayan mountains to practice where they are more directly connected to the divine. The lifeways of Indigenous peoples, among the earliest to be impacted by development and climate change, still choose the practices that keep their livelihood and life habits close to the land. Animists believe all things have a spirit and are animated and that the world, in all its immensity, is interconnected. For these traditions and countless others, seeing nature as sacred is universal, perhaps so commonplace that we sometimes fail to see its sacredness in our everyday, lived experience.

Still, the absence of land relating that this Barefoot participant described aligns with what Devin Zuber, Associate Professor of American Studies, Religion, and Literature at Graduate Theological Union in Berkeley, identified when teaching a literature ecocriticism course in New York City. Zuber laments "a prevailing assumption that nature is separate from our densely populated streets, that it is in upstate New York's Adirondacks, in New Jersey's Pine Barrens, perhaps maybe, in the north of Central Park, but certainly not in the urban spaces we inhabit as New Yorkers."[8] For Zuber's class, it was imperative to expand on the working definition of nature, to widen the angle on land relating.

In the 1980s, at the height of the technological revolution and the anxieties and stress that followed, the Japanese government began encouraging technology firms to de-stress daily, through *shinrin-yoku,* "taking in the forest air" translated into English as "forest bathing." It happened that in reconnecting more deeply with the forest, residents began to experience the nation's forests more profoundly and imagined a future value in the wilderness far greater than

realized economically from the logging industry. While not a research goal at the outset, it should be noted that in drawing closer to land, an extraordinary care unfolded that helped residents rethink their choices for future generations. Pointing to the generational impact of forest bathing, Dr. Quing Li, Associate Professor at the Nippon Medical School in Tokyo and President of the Japanese Society of Forest Therapy, reminds us that it is our children who will shape the future. If we let the child go outdoors and explore nature early, they will soon become the ones who care for and protect it.[9]

In Barefoot Dialogue, we are inspired at the proposition of easing land access for our participants and centering nature more directly in human dialogue. To be clear, Barefoot is not some panacea, not even a fix as much as a construct that allows our most whole selves, land included, to step into the quagmire of entanglements and relationships that need reordering, clarification, connection, meaning, and no doubt, healing.

For Zuber, literature, particularly poetry, has a special function in nurturing a land ethic, "a deepening connection to the areas we inhabit, an awareness of the systems that shape our habitats into something unique."[10] Building on Leopold's connection between an ecological conscience and individual responsibility, Zuber posits that the land ethic is a moral imperative that assumes relationship and requires imagination.

> "If a land ethic is contingent on the senses that observe the areas we inhabit, and these observations are enriched by knowledge of ecosystems and circulations often invisible to the naked eye, it is equally dependent on the human imagination; the universal and innate capacity to imagine ourselves and others beyond the confines of what is seen, heard and felt."[11]

There are numerous ways that centering land in dialogue at Oberlin has proven helpful in building relationships and firing the imagination, beyond what we have previously experienced, and in ways particularly helpful during turbulent times. There are three worth mentioning here:

1. *Land increases the sense of safety and thereby the capacity for courage that participants feel in Barefoot Dialogue*. The correlation between including non-human species and creating safe and courageous dialogue spaces is apparent in the post-dialogue debriefs. Over and over, when processing dialogues, facilitators and Barefoot hosts point to the significant role land plays in fostering accessible, safe, and courageous spaces as though there is a warmth, a familiarity, and a resilience that land uniquely leverages in human relating. Embracing land, we might join the Psalmist and look up unto the mountains from where comes our strength, or meet Rumi, beyond ideas, in a field, when the soul lies down in that grass; and dream with Black Elk, seeing a world where there is nothing but the spirit of all things.

2. *Land helps dialogue participants reflect on their personal limitations and biases.* When we are successful in composing diverse groups, Barefoot participants have an opportunity to hear the land histories of their dialogue peers, histories that can vary radically. Land that humans own, farm for another, trespass, or place in a trust, all vary. Where we travel to escape hardship or violence, places we go to study, or destinations we travel for vacation each expose the wide diversity of lived experiences. Land complicates conversation in beneficial ways that help invite, inform and instruct participants around their own biases. Centering land helps identify myriad limitations that a dialogue group might encounter, including language, ethnicity, personal identity, and the most basic provisions of shelter, food and one's livelihood.

   The way in which land can beneficially complicate dialogues was aptly described by a Barefoot facilitator this way:

   > "Land is the surface that holds us. We live in a world of extreme greed and I have thought so much about land. If this place is to be used for human beings, if someone takes a huge space, where else will people live? Land ownership is a topic I struggle with. If people can buy land, what else will they buy? The skies and the oceans? At home, even though people own land and possess it, there is less of an emphasis on private property. When I see "private" I do not feel I belong there. I go back to nature and the way animals interact, sometimes they're territorial but have some flexibility as opposed to human beings, animals move from one place to the other. Land possession alienates some people forever."[12]

3. *Land invites stories and conversations around human belonging.* There is a common pattern in Barefoot Dialogue where land's presence invites participants to share from their many stories, particularly stories where specific places in their lives hold sacred meaning, places they can map in a heartbeat. Consistently "place" invites honest conversations around belonging and estrangement; spirituality, belief, and ritual; family, community, and the places we call "home." Here, it matters what facilitators bring to dialogue as the starting point of the dialogue, what we in Barefoot call the "centerpiece." This might be a text, song, or an art piece–something curated by facilitators whose deep listening and attention to their dialogue participants helps inform what they craft.

There is a story bell hooks tells that Barefoot facilitators choose to center in dialogues from time to time, a story that speaks powerfully to the intersection of who she was at her core, who she was becoming, and where she called home. Together, they speak of wholeness and belonging.

> As a child, I loved playing in the dirt, in that rich Kentucky soil, that was a source of life. …When I left my native place for the first time, I brought with me two artifacts from

> home that were emblematic of my growing up life, braided tobacco and the crazy quilt Baba, mama's mother, had given me when I was a young girl. These two totems were to remind me always of where I come from and who I am at my core. They stand between me and the madness that exile makes, the brokenheartedness. They are present in my new life to remind me that I can always return home...to reassure myself that I still belonged, that I had not become so changed that I could not come home again.[13]

Centering Land in Barefoot Dialogue

Centering land in human dialogue is interesting when we consider that land already is; bidden or not, land is with us, always—hardly ours to center. Think of the 800-year-old tree tucked in a park surrounded by skyscrapers in downtown Tokyo or the sole dandelion springing up in the cracks of sidewalks in the heart of New York City. A task Barefoot Dialogue is always managing is how to see, really behold, what we pass by every day. Here, the Barefoot model owes its evolution and continued experimentation to the facilitators and participants in Barefoot who lead with curiosity and imagination.

In Barefoot, it might be:

- Setting a large squash vegetable on a chair of its own in the dialogue circle;
- Playing a recording of water splashing and children playing at nearby Chance Creek;
- Centering the body and mind to recordings of ocean waves offering a rhythm for breathing exercises;
- Engaging a photography exhibit, featuring gorgeous, up-close images of the peduncle, receptacle, sepal and petal–parts of a flower;
- Pushing furniture to the walls for dancing at the start of the dialogue where each participant embodies a growing beanstalk, from seed to harvest;
- Reading poetry that captures the suffering and rage of land expressed in natural disasters;
- Spreading out at a park, each under the shade of a different tree, absorbing the root vibrations they argue are real;
- Departing in silence after each participant plants a succulent in a small pot, then trading with another participant, each for their bedside window to nurture them and foster connection through the winter months; or
- Journaling after a saunter and play activity scheduled at the height of fallen leaves–rakes provided.

Each of these encounters, plus thousands in waiting, allow for intimacy with nature and one another, where our busyness is slowed, phones silenced, and our senses fully engaged. These land encounters, however brief, have the power to conjure in the minds of participants natural stories, however directly or indirectly–powerful memories: past, present, and future. Chaplains, curators of ritual, have rich opportunities here to guide participants in being with land, requiring

only what is essential, centering in ways that recognize and share the powers of memory and imagination.

We must clearly acknowledge the enormous privilege that comes with land access which is not today, nor at any time in our history, distributed equitably across the country, nor around the world. There follows a duty of conscience for any of us carrying such privileges to share boldly in our respective communities, individually and collectively. Colleges and universities are compelled to join and empower individuals to move beyond spoken land acknowledgements alone. Imagine widening community access, an institutional vulnerability—yes, but one that surely invites an answering trust between colleges and the towns in which they reside. It bears adding a word here about the universality of land engagement and experience. Air, land and water are not for a reserved few, neither are they truly "owned." They never were. These provisions cannot be construed as gifts that only a select number of people "deserve."

Barefoot participants are quick to point to the benefits when reflecting on the role land plays for them in their own lives and in communities they engage. Nature "provides me with the sense of something 'greater than.'"[14] "It is a mirror held up so that I can see myself more clearly;"[15]"Barefoot has helped me focus more on land [and] pay attention to the land I am inhabiting and everyone else who has been on this land before me."[16]

While it may be difficult to know precisely how and to what extent centering land deepens connection, the impact can be breathtaking when a circle of participants fall silent, suddenly tearful, grief-stricken at the depth and breadth of decimated land, ruined soil in war zones, where small children cannot remember a field of green. When, from a simple poem, a participant ponders the wrongful incarceration of a Black man, freed from imprisonment, where friends are just outside the gate, fiercely beating drums of freedom—to which the participant wonders aloud, how might this be akin to the fading sonar of a Great Whale finally freed?

*****

Barefoot Dialogue is nimble to encourage the safe and courageous conversations that participants most desire and with whom they bravely wish to engage. In addition to our general groups composed with an eye for students across self-identified differences, there are affinity groups engaging differences within shared identities and experiences (multi-racial, Jewish intragroup, Trans identity, Black identity and experience, grief and loss, multifaith, personal trauma, and since October 2023, Israel and Palestine), each seeking to harvest meaning across differences. The most common entry for participants is composed of first-year students seeking a deeper dive into the engagement of diverse students making campus their new, shared home. Over time, students learn that Barefoot Dialogue is organically crafted, even customized, group by group for flexibility, to encourage hosts and facilitators to prioritize meaning, connection, and relevance. One size does not fit all. Given the freedom that Barefoot encourages, no two groups are alike.

In the past year, the Barefoot approach has been utilized in various formats between current students and the Board of Trustees, offering multiple groups in equal numbers on various issues stemming from the war in Gaza; between staff members in the Division in Student Affairs on a range of topics in higher education (race and class, free expression, political divisions, etc.); at conferences featuring interfaith engagement; and between their own peers at other colleges and universities at a summer conference, comparing and contrasting student belonging.

In each of these, Barefoot participants observe patterns that emerge across seasons and settings, patterns that underscore triumphs and challenges in human and land relating; that center at the heart of the imagination where dwells hurt and healing, discovery and joy; and that inform pedagogies where storytelling transforms. These are lessons that nature often teaches best.

In directing this work, a question I ask myself often in Barefoot is "how might we make land more directly accessible so that land can teach freely?" The outdoors is our best friend. I am reminded of a talk that Robin Wall Kimmerer gave early in the pandemic. Asked how to develop pedagogy that is more inclusive of Indigenous knowledge, Kimmerer lit up and with delight implored the viewers to take it outdoors. Take anything you can outdoors. Get out of land's way. Let land teach.[17]

When we get out of land's way, the takeaways seem endless. Land lessons we are currently lifting in Barefoot Dialogue that feel timely, maybe timeless, include:

1. Nature does not worry for tomorrow, neither does it borrow ahead. It does not grow anxious tending what is not yet.
2. Nature harms and heals precisely where it harms, provided the harm is stopped and priority is placed on tending the harm.
3. There is always more going on than meets the eye. In every season, and in every moment of every day, something is at work, seen or unseen. Imagine making room for what we do not yet know. As for hardship, imagine that every human and non-human species we meet is fighting an uphill battle somewhere in their journey.
4. Biodiversity enriches. In the forest, the diversity of tree species is a benefit. Lesser known, the mix of young, middle and old aged trees also benefit the growth of each. Consider the enrichment made possible through varied, expanded circles.
5. When creativity is dulled, ideas lacking, try outside. Breathe. Lend focus on something natural, up close. Watch its ways. Watch you watch it.
6. Land invites a "here and now-ness" that encourages focus and strengthens relevance.
7. Seasons teach us rhythm–ebb and flow, times of growth and times of being fallow, loss and return, wet and dry. In these stretches of time, we are reminded simply that more is not always better and the value of rest, in all its states, is necessary for what is next.
8. Land teaches us that certain seasons are required before the next season's arrival. Healing cannot be rushed, but the time to start the healing process is always now.

The morning after the U.S. Presidential election twenty years ago, beloved Pulitzer Prize and Nobel Prize recipient Toni Morrison grieved the state of the world and penned these words, "I know the world is bruised and bleeding, and though it is important not to ignore its pain, it is also critical to refuse to succumb to its malevolence."[18] Morrison's words then still ring true. "This is precisely the time when artists go to work. There is no time for despair, no place for self-pity, no need for silence, no room for fear. We speak, we write, we do language. That is how civilizations heal."[19]

Like artists, chaplains have a prophetic calling to search and point the way. Sustained dialogue offers a context for human and land relating from which one can listen more fully and point more wisely. To listen and point, we will need to be in groups that reflect a more shared future. We are compelled to be in groups with farmers, educators, nurses, athletes, artists, lawyers, factory workers, musicians, pharmacists, coal miners, politicians, truck drivers, and spiritual mentors; a circle richly diverse on lines of race, language, nationality; across class and gender, from urban, suburban and rural; young, middle-aged and old. It will take all of us.

In his prophetic collection of essays, *Democracy in a Hotter Time: Climate Change and Democratic Transformation,* Paul Sears Distinguished Professor of Environmental Studies and Politics Emeritus at Oberlin College and currently Professor of Practice at Arizona State University, David Orr, calls us to the urgency of this moment: "If we are to be reconciled to the Earth," he writes, "expansive and necessary visions must live in the minds and lives of our youth. …They should come into adulthood with a sense of authentic hope in a world still rich with possibilities."[20] Orr adds: "For those who teach and administer, it is time to ask what is education for, especially now? It is time to rethink the enterprise called "research" and better deploy our intelligence and compassion to meet human needs for food, shelter, health care, education, conviviality, safety and energy."[21]

In these divisive times, I take encouragement from the *expansive and necessary visions* of students I have the honor to mentor at Oberlin, students choosing to center land and striving to find *authentic hope*. I am heartened by their honesty and their directness.

In Barefoot, we take our parting words at the end of dialogue seriously. We recognize the importance of acknowledging all that has happened in the circle, naming what may be required to sustain one another between dialogues, and inviting participants to return soon even as there may still be challenges here to attend. Upholding that practice, I part with the words of reflection shared by a student facilitator, a reflection written over time in their Barefoot journal:

Surrounded by rapid cricket sounds,
I do not think that peace and haste particularly mix.
A breeze on my back:
I need to come between myself and the noise,
to slow into the fullness of nature's sound/silence.
An ant climbing each knuckle of my hand:

The inner child that first understood refuge in the backyard brush
cannot be barred by an estranged adult front.

Trees breathe slowly.

That inner child looks beyond boundaries,
questions the necessity of powers that be,
sees a world full of everything Possible,
As the sun circles down.
This is work. Remember that.
And isn't it wonderful that the work brings me closer to life.[22]

---

[1] Wendell Berry, *The Peace of Wild Things and Other Poems,* (London: Penguin Books Ltd., 2018), 144.
[2] Simon Jackman, "America More Divided Than at Any Time Since the Civil War," Election 2024 Series, *United States Study Centre*, first published in *The Australian*, March 15, 2022.https://www.ussc.edu.au/america-more-divided-than-at-any-time-since-civil-war.
[3] Jackman.
[4] Amy Harmon, "Can Humans Find Common Ground? Sure. Just Start with Sea Slugs," *New York Times,* December 11, 2022, https://www.nytimes.com/2022/12/09/us/inaturalist-nature-app.html.
[5] Harmon.
[6] Aldo Leopold, *A Sand County Almanac,* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1966), 219.
[7] Barefoot Data, 2023.
[8] Devin Zuber, "Imagination, Beauty, and the Urban Land Ethic: Teaching Environmental Literature in New York City," in *Still the Same Hawk: Reflections on Nature in New York,* ed. John Waldman, (New York: Fordham University Press, 2013), 109.
[9] Qing Li, *Shinrin-Yoku: The Art and Science of Forest Bathing,* (London: Penguin, 2018).
[10] Zuber, 210.
[11] Zuber, 210.
[12] Barefoot Data, 2024.
[13] bell hooks. *Belonging: A Culture of Place*. (New York: Routledge, 2009), 16.
[14] Barefoot Data, 2023.
[15] Barefoot Letter, Spring 2021.
[16] Barefoot Dialogue: Annual Report 2022-2023, 9.
[17] Robin Wall Kimmerer, *What Plants Can Teach Us,* Talk at Concord Academy, Concord, MA, May 12, 2020.
[18] Toni Morrison, "No Place for Self-pity, No Room for Fear," *The Nation,* March 23, 2015.
[19] Morrison.

[20] David W. Orr, *Democracy in a Hotter Time: Climate Change and Democratic Transformation,* Cambridge: MIT Press, 2023, 8.
[21] Orr.
[22] Barefoot Facilitator, *Journal,* 2024.

Creating Brave Spaces through Interfaith Programs in Spirituality & the Arts

Alexander Levering Kern
Executive Director, Center for Spirituality, Dialogue, and Service
Northeastern University

Abstract: *A brief description of Northeastern University's Spirituality and the Arts initiative, followed by a selection of poems illustrating the way the arts can contribute to the creation of brave space.*

Keywords: *poetry, arts, spirituality, beauty, healing*

Much has been written about the nature of safe and brave spaces in higher education. As chaplains and spiritual life professionals, we strive to create environments- physical, spiritual, dialogical, and communal- that engender powerful experiences of renewal, learning, healing, and growth. While these spaces may provide a sense of safety and sanctuary from the demands of campus life, at their best they also invite courageous risk-taking and creative experimentation. Through structured dialogues and spiritual practices, chaplains offer "comfort zones" and "homes away from home," while simultaneously inviting students to step outside those comfort zones and open themselves to the inward life, to the sacred dimension, to "the other," and to wider worlds beyond our campus walls.

In my experience at Northeastern University, some of the most profound experiences of "brave space" – relational sites of deep encounter with what Martin Buber called I and Thou and the Eternal Thou between and among us- have occurred through our Center's initiatives in Spirituality & the Arts. These programs invite students to exercise their authentic voices and visions. Accompanied by seasoned spiritual mentors and artists, many students discover gifts and talents they never knew they possessed, or areas of life and learning that had long lain dormant. Experiential immersion in spirituality & the arts demands of young adults a brave engagement with challenging artistic themes and subjects, and an opportunity to take risks in reflective dialogue about whatever "third thing" we gather around – a painting, a poem, a photograph, a story.

Our Spirituality & the Arts initiative launched in the spring semester of 2020, just as we left campus for quarantine at the outset of the COVID-19 pandemic. Over several years, we have developed an array of dynamic offerings led by teams of students, staff, faculty, and internationally known writers and artists. Each program invites students to imagine, co-create, and experience brave space. In the process, they discover a sense of belonging across difference

and summon the courage to be and become the persons they are – co-creators of a more just, peaceful, and sustainable world.

Among the programs we have found most successful in creating brave spaces are the following:

1) *Pensive: A Global Journal of Spirituality & the Arts* (www.pensivejournal.com). Beginning in Spring 2020 and approaching our fifth anniversary and tenth issue in 2025, *Pensive* is an online annual journal that invites submissions from interfaith poets, writers, and visual artists ranging from established, award-winning contributors to newer, emerging voices. Some of our students submit their work for peer review, a courageous act in an encouraging space. The entire Board engages in thoughtful, reflective dialogues around the thousands of submissions we receive each year. As part of the editorial process, our board members take creative risks, offering their unique responses and insights in a supportive, non-hierarchical, democratic environment. At the same time, they develop professional skills in leadership, editing, publishing, graphic design and layout, social media marketing, public speaking, website management, and correspondence with contributors and readers. Together, our students and staff design a range of *Pensive*-related events including hybrid Celebrations to launch each issue and special readings for Black History Month, Juneteenth, and other occasions.
2) Brave space requires careful tending and ample opportunities for self (and group) expression, Our *Writers-in-Residence* offer biweekly *Creative Freewriting & Journaling Workshops*, employing mindfulness practices and empowering pedagogies drawn from Nadia Colburn's Align Your Story model and Pat Schneider's Amherst Writers and Artists organization. These sessions invite students to bravely engage their own stories and concerns in safe, structured, liberating workshop settings, and to share their first drafts of writing aloud with others in a judgment-free community of practice.
3) Similarly, our *Faculty Affiliate-led programs* provide skilled mentors who enable students to experiment with poetry, music, baking, cooking, and leading others in creative mindfulness practice. Our Music as Healing and Soul Sessions, for example, invite students to learn the basics of healing rhythm, improvise and listen to one another, and share their musical works-in-progress.
4) Our student-led *Art and Soul Nights* and *Open-Mics/Coffee Houses* provide opportunities for creative expression, interfaith/intercultural community-building, dialogue, mindfulness, and stress management through a range of media, including painting, origami, collage, mindfulness jars, bracelet-making, slam poetry, flag-making, etc.
5) *Off-campus Cultural Immersion Trips* to local theaters, museums, and poetry readings open our students to ever-wider experiences that advance interfaith/intercultural/artistic learning, bridge building with off-campus communities, and personal spiritual/ethical reflection. Examples include attending plays about restorative justice from a Caribbean perspective, a reading by former US Poet Laureate Tracy K. Smith, visiting Boston

Museum of Fine Arts galleries featuring Jewish, Muslim, Christian, Hindu, Christian, and traditional African art; and taking field trips to read/perform poems at local venues.

6) *Global Dance and Musical Events*: our Center hosts a range of South Asian student groups for their weekly practices, performances, and sacred festival observances, providing celebratory occasions for embodied cultural and spiritual practice in a safe/brave setting.
7) *Integration of creative/expressive arts programming into our annual Global Spirituality and Leadership Retreats and Experiential Learning Trips to Spiritually Rooted Social Justice Sites (pilgrimages to the Civil Rights South, the Arizona-Mexico borderlands, etc.)* When we travel with students off-campus, we strive to create interfaith brave spaces through a variety of pedagogies, including creative expression to enrich dialogue, processing, and growth. For example, our Jewish and Buddhist Spiritual Advisors (chaplains) have both led journaling workshops; our Muslim staff and students lead Islamic calligraphy and henna sessions; our Protestant spiritual advisors and students lead interfaith prayer bead-making.

When we launched these programs in 2020, we could scarcely imagine the myriad and meaningful ways our students would discover and create brave spaces of learning, healing, and interfaith cooperation. If our work is to educate and mentor rising generations of leaders to tackle societal problems and build a better world, we must harness the sacred powers of imagination. Spirituality & the Arts can help lead the way.

In closing, I share three poems I have written that depict discrete experiences of "brave spaces." These pieces are part of a larger poetry collection I'm writing about the vocation of chaplaincy and interfaith leadership in higher education. These poems – and poetry more broadly- can be incorporated in spiritual life programs such as creative freewriting and journaling workshops, guided meditations, liturgies, retreats, vigils, or open mic nights and coffeehouses. Each of these poems arises from a vastly different "moment" or "situation" in campus life, where brave spaces are either consciously curated or arise spontaneously under certain conditions. These moments include:

- an ecumenical prayer night in the annual Week of Prayer for Christian Unity, held each January across the United State. Here, as an attender, I witnessed students' worshipping, singing, and speaking their truths - a wildly diverse group of people at their most vulnerable, and paradoxically, perhaps, at their most powerful.
- a one-on-one spiritual caregiving conversation with a Chinese international student on Zoom, calling Boston from Northeastern's San Jose campus to share her story of spiritual opening,
- an experience I had - sadly all too familiar- of planning a campus vigil following a school shooting in a far-off city

What I Learned from Students Last Night

And so, friends, I thought I knew all there is to know
about mantras, chants, & repetitive prayers.
After all, my mother & her Quaker friends
would gather in the treetops of West Virginia
to read sacred texts & add their voices
to the peepers & crickets & great-horned owls,
each one a little great part of the whole.
As for me, my heart fell in love with the chants
of Taizé – sitting with other young seekers
as the white-robed monks sang lullabies
and psalms of the world to come.

In college I learned of the mysteries of Om,
and added my voice to the millions chanting
peace to the streets in the roiling rivers of war.

Yes, I thought I knew something
of how word becomes flesh,
and sings in the choir lofts of the heart,
and seeps through the university halls
as the Sufis and Buddhists of Soka Gakkai
deliver us to the place beyond words.

But just last night I stood with Catholics,
Protestants, & charismatic praise-singing students,
and my assumptions about popular music melted
as I heard in the exquisite repetitions
the ancient repetitive naming of Life
then a brave young leader named Isabel Silva
spoke with prophetic power and poise
on how the final word of faith is Acceptance
& radical embrace & acts of service we cannot explain,
yet nevertheless we must repeat,
again, again, and again.

Yes, Beauty *Will* Save the World

On the far side of Turtle Island
in the glass towers of Silicon Valley
my Chinese student speaks of a world away,
a memory so precious we both had to cry
for there was nothing more to say.

I asked her whether she'd ever felt
a moment of unequivocal joy
or awe or wonder, or known a time
when heaven & earth held hands,
to remind us we're not so far apart.

She paused, drew a breath, looked squarely
at me, through eyes that had seen eternity
but perhaps never mustered
a little satchel of brittle words,
to share the glory she'd seen.

"It was wintertime in St. Petersburg,
at the symphony, *Swan Lake* I remember-
it was as if I were transported suddenly,
enraptured as I walked out into the world,
the world of winter, ice on the river,
so glorious as the evening sun peeked
through the clouds, a sunset so orange
& scarlet & purple & blue and then
I saw her: a woman on the bridge,
sun setting behind her, her arms extended
as if she could fly, as if she too were a swan."

Note: the poem's title comes from Dostoyevsky's novel *The Idiot*, often quoted by Dorothy Day of the Catholic Worker.Turtle Island is a traditional Indigenous name for the continent others call North America.

Beyond the "Thoughts & Prayers"

Before you gather up all your spiritual doodads,
your electric candles and singing bowl,
soft chairs in a circle for healing & support,
in the wake of another mass shooting –

before you open up the desktop file
marked Healing Vigils & Times of Remembrance
and wonder whether any words remain
to offer some meager comfort and care –

before your wounded heart bursts the bounds
of your Oxford shirt with its little panes
in two shades of blue, before your soul blows
through an open window out onto the quad

gathering every precious young life in its care,
before you check the closets
for extra tissues and dim the lights
of the Sacred Space, & open your arms

to the cluster of bodies, seekers like you,
with no spiritual cures or theological scrolls
to explain the mysteries of why we humans
still kill each other, before all this –

look up and notice the January snowfall
as it anoints the evergreens & broken boughs
of deciduous trees and the head of each stranger
and neighbor shuffling by, whirling their words

back into being, with that strange white manna
that feeds our hunger, and look for the chill balm
that reminds us all: You are ever beloved:
each winter-damp hair on your head is counted,
cherished, & known. I will not leave you
to face your fears alone.

> Note: the final sentence of this poem alludes to Thomas Merton's prayer in times of transition from *Thoughts in Solitude*, sometimes called" The Merton Prayer": "I will not fear, for you are ever with me, and you will never leave me to face my perils alone.

In sharing these programs and poems, I invite you to consider the varied ways that brave space appears in your own contexts, sometimes carefully planned, at other times sudden and unexpected. As we face the immense suffering on our campuses and in the wider world, I invite us to think together about marshaling creative expression more fully in our work, that we too might encourage each other with the promise that somehow, beauty will save the world.

Alexander Levering Kern is the founding executive director of the Center for Spirituality, Dialogue, and Service at Northeastern University and founding editor/publisher of *Pensive: A Global Journal of Spirituality & the Arts*. A chaplain, Quaker educator, interfaith organizer, and poet based in Boston and Chebeague Island, Maine, he is the author of *What an Island Knows: Poems* and editor of *Becoming Fire: Spiritual Writing from Rising Generations*.

Book Review:

Blessings for Your Students: Prayers for Interfaith Communities in Higher Education, by Janet Fuller. New York: Church Publishing, 2024, Pp. xxvi, 183, $24.95 (Paperback).

Valerie Bailey
Chaplain
Williams College

Abstract: *Higher Education Chaplains who find themselves scrambling for the right words for a religiously diverse or secular audiences may find a great resource in Janet Fuller's book:* Blessings for Your Students: Prayers for Interfaith Communities in Higher Education. *Fuller worked in Higher Education Chaplaincy for more than 40 years and is the co-director of the Master of Arts in Chaplaincy at Hartford International University.*

Keywords: *Janet Fuller, liturgy, blessings, higher education chaplaincy*

Higher Education Chaplains working in religiously diverse or secular audiences may find a great resource in Janet Fuller's book: *Blessings for Your Students: Prayers for Interfaith Communities in Higher Education*. Fuller is an Episcopal priest who has worked in Higher Education Chaplaincy for more than 40 years. She is currently the co-director of the Master of Arts in Chaplaincy at Hartford International University.

"Blessings for Your Students" joins other books of liturgy, poetry, well-crafted and elegant thoughts often used to bless new sacred moments, such as *To Bless the Space Between Us: A Book of Blessings* by John O'Donohue (2008). In this books' introduction, O'Donohue speaks of how "progress" has cut away at the "human tissue and webbing" that had once connected people. This lack of belonging has left us without rituals to "protect, encourage and guide" us as we cross into unknown and unfamiliar territory. "For such crossings we need to find new words." (O'Donohue, xiii-xiv).

Fuller's book finds new words for higher education blessing moments, drawing from Episcopal prayer traditions. In writing these blessings, Fuller is mindful to not alienate people from the task of finding meaning in complex experiences. To that end, she rewrites her Christian blessings in such a way that the new words of blessing hold meaning making space for multiple faiths and secular audiences. Fuller's blessing resonates across differences and remind us about what makes us human and what we all still share as our world changes and some traditions fade and may lose its signifying power.

The book of blessings is organized by chapters organized by the following categories: Transition and Change (1), Challenge, Crisis and Grief (2), Justice (3), Wonder and Hope (4), Gratitude (5), Campus Occasions (6). Each chapter begins with a reflection on Fuller's experience in higher education and how college and university chaplains hold space for students during various important moments in the academic year. The reflections are as valuable as the blessings.

These blessings are usable for various occasions, but especially ones that occur only in higher education such as choosing a major. In two stanzas of a blessing, Fuller writes:

Send your wisdom to help us know
that what we do will be a blessing,
that the major we choose will be a good one,
that we cannot go wrong,
and that it will all become plain.

And give patience for those restless hearts
as we wait, walk, work and wrestle
for enlightening recognition
and a vision of who we are to be.
(Discerning a Major, 49)

While these words may have been inspired by higher education, they contain the heart of the new words that may been needed for modern day blessings in a world where our experiences and our future plans are often difficult to communicate across differences. Fuller's work reminds us that our various religious traditions may have tools to find the new language needed for new and complex experiences. Shared blessings may help turn these complex experiences into points of unity and shared humanity rather than divisions. For example, from her blessing for choosing a major:

Are you there?
Can you hear the struggle of mind and heart
that pushes and pulls,
hangs them over the abyss
of unknowing,
when everyone we know
is sure?
Can you see ahead
When we cannot?
(Discerning a Major, 48)

The essence of what this blessing celebrates for a student's choice of major could also be used to celebrate moments beyond higher education: a new job, relocation to a new city or any major life decision. In a similar way, this blessing, while written for a specific student on the occasion of her graduation, could also be used for many reasons. Fuller writes:

For the future daily nearing –
Make her ready for it all
Be visible among friends she chooses.
Be known in her success.
Tangle up your love in the family she creates
And may every meaning she makes include your abiding belief in her.
Extend your blessing as she commits to her part to make a more just world.
Protect her from every evil and make her grateful in the face of hurt.
(For This One Student, 106-107)

Fuller also sees how these blessings could be used widely and beyond higher education. Unlike clerics and religious leaders from specific religious traditions, Higher Education chaplains regularly experience how not all communities are not God-oriented and sometimes secular. While clerics and religious leaders may be aware of waning religious interests, Higher Education Chaplains are constantly working with people who are searching for spiritual realities beyond a specific religious tradition. In her work as a chaplain, Fuller has been supportive of these searches and offers blessings in her book that affirm various spiritual journeys as valid, true and worthy searches.

This book may make a good addition to the many other books that chaplains' reference when preparing for opening and closing words at events, especially as audiences are becoming increasingly diverse. Fuller's book reminds us that while we are complex, we are moved by similar feelings and experiences and is a useful tool from religious traditions that can be used to hold space for all of humanity. But clerics and religious leaders of other traditions may also find this book helpful, if not as a template for finding the words to speak widely after holding space for reflection and meaning making.

Valerie Bailey has been the Chaplain to the College at Williams College since 2018. She has been a college chaplain for a total of eighteen years at several other campuses. She is also an Episcopal Priest who has worked in parishes in Massachusetts, New Jersey and New York.

ASSOCIATION FOR CHAPLAINCY AND SPIRITUAL LIFE IN HIGHER EDUCATION

UNFOLDING:
UNIVERSITY CHAPLAINCY IN PRACTICE
ISSUE 2 FEBRUARY 2025

Contributors

Tauseef Akbar

M. Tauseef Akbar, a native Chicagoan is a Muslim chaplain who has worked in the fields of community building, civic advocacy, and religious leadership for 15 years. Chaplain Tauseef previously served in Muslim and interfaith chaplain roles at Georgetown University, St. Olaf College and Carleton College. He currently serves as the Associate Director of Spiritual Life and Coordinator of Muslim Life at the University of Chicago.

Nathan Albert

Rev. Dr. Nathan Albert serves as the University Chaplain and Assistant Vice President at the University of Lynchburg. Additionally, he is an adjunct professor in the interreligious chaplaincy program at United Theological Seminary of the Twin Cities and sits on the Board of Directors of ACSLHE. He holds a Bachelor of Fine Arts in Musical Theatre Performance, and a Master of Divinity, and a Doctor of Ministry in Interreligious Chaplaincy where his research looks at the way chaplains can disrupt Christian hegemony at institutions of higher education.

Margaret Alsup

Reverend Margaret Alsup has served as the College Chaplain and Director of Service at Lyon College for eight years. They are an ordained minister in the Presbyterian Church USA and author of Fresh Outlook Bible Studies: Sex and the Bible.

Valerie Bailey

Valerie Bailey has been the Chaplain to the College at Williams College since 2018. She has been a college chaplain for a total of eighteen years at several other campuses. She is also an Episcopal Priest who has worked in parishes in Massachusetts, New Jersey and New York.

Preeta Banerjee

Preeta M. Banerjee, Ph.D. serves in Babson College's Office of Belonging and Inclusion as Associate Director for Spiritual Life. She draws on over 25 years of experience as a business school professor, corporate executive, life coach and higher education chaplain to bring together spirituality, community, innovation and entrepreneurship. Her practice is rooted in bhakti, gyan, raj and karma yoga.

Elizabeth Hakken Candido

Elizabeth Hakken Candido is an ordained Presbyterian (USA) Pastor who has spent her career working in interfaith and multi-faith landscapes. She serves as College Chaplain and Director of Religious Life at Kalamazoo College in Kalamazoo, MI. An essayist and fiction writer, Liz's work has appeared in a variety of publications including Sojourners, Presbyterian Outlook, and Psychology Today.

Heather Gerbsch Daugherty

Heather Gerbsch Daugherty has served university communities for over two decades, most recently at Belmont University. University chaplaincy gives her the opportunity to journey with students as they explore issues of faith, vocation, and navigating the world with intention. She is a candidate for Holy Orders in the Episcopal Church.

David Dorsey

David Dorsey, D. Min., (he/him), is in his twelfth year as Multifaith Chaplain, Lecturer, and Director of Sustained Dialogue at Oberlin College & Conservatory. David and his partner and wife, June, Rector at St. Andrew's Episcopal Church, enjoy life and learning alongside the many species at their one-hectare patch in Oberlin on the land of the Haudenosaunee where sugar season is already underway. David enjoys speaking about multifaith engagement, human-land relating, and actively addressing the justice entanglements of our day. In the larger community, David serves on the City of Oberlin Human Relations Commission, the Oberlin Community Services board, and the Oberlin City Schools Wellness Committee.

Joel Harter

Joel Harter (he/him) is the Associate Dean of Students for Spirituality and Meaning-Making at Cornell University and convenes the multifaith team of affiliated chaplains and spiritual leaders who form Cornell United Religious Work. Joel is an ordained American Baptist minister with a passion for supporting the spiritual wellbeing of religious and secular students.

Hannah Adams Ingram

Rev. Dr. Hannah Adams Ingram has served as the Director of Religious Life and College Chaplain at Franklin College for over seven years. She is an ordained minister in the United Church of Christ and author of *The Myth of the Saving Power of Education* (2021).

Alexander Levering Kern

Alexander Levering Kern is the founding executive director of the Center for Spirituality, Dialogue, and Service at Northeastern University and founding editor/publisher of *Pensive: A Global Journal of Spirituality & the Arts*. A chaplain, Quaker educator, interfaith organizer, and poet based in Boston and Chebeague Island, Maine, he is the author of *What an Island Knows: Poems* and editor of *Becoming Fire: Spiritual Writing from Rising Generations*.

Stephanie McLemore

Stephanie McLemore currently serves as Chaplain and Director of the Spiritual Life Center at Denison University. Her broad experience includes ministry in local churches, judicatory work, wellness administration and higher education. Stephanie is an ordained Disciple of Christ pastor, and lives in central Ohio with her daughters, her mother, family dog, two fish and a pet tarantula.

Alex Miller-Knaack

Alex Miller-Knaack brings a deep commitment to helping student in higher education, drawing on her experience in student support and chaplaincy. Her work reflects a passion for fostering inclusive, thoughtful dialogue on the evolving role of student support, including chaplaincy, in academic settings.

Tracy Mehr-Muska

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).