

“...in Desert Storm...it became absolutely clear to him that men and women who could pray together ought not to be killing one another.”

Children of Abraham

by Janice Harris Lord, M.S.S.W.



Our son decided to go into the Christian ministry while listening to a Muslim pray. Steve, a Marine artillery officer in Desert Storm,

ordered his platoon to shell an Iraqi tank platoon and then moved forward to assess the situation. The Iraqi soldiers were either dead, dying or surrendering.

The Iraqi platoon commander approached Steve and, through a Kuwaiti interpreter, requested permission to pray over his dead and dying men. He revealed that one of the dead men's brother and father had already been killed, and he was agonizing over how to break the news to this man's mother that her only remaining son was now dead too.

Steve lowered his gun, granted the request, and listened to the Muslim prayer chanted in Arabic. Though he could not understand the language, he says it was the most beautiful prayer he had ever heard. At that moment, Steve said, it became absolutely clear to him that men and women who could pray together ought not to be killing one another. He resolved to spend the rest of his life working for peace.

Out of that experience, my husband, the pastor of Rush Creek Christian Church in Arlington, Texas, initiated a study group with Congregation Beth Shalom, a conservative Jewish community. He and Rabbi Keith Stearn shared a desire to include Muslims, but it seemed difficult to accomplish. Eventually, they contacted Muslim leaders at Texas Christian University, and a six-week dialogue was established with two meetings at the Christian church, two at the Synagogue, and two at the Mosque in Ft. Worth. Speakers addressed the distinctiveness of each faith followed by lively small group discussion. For many, the sessions offered their first opportunity to enter the house of worship of other faiths.

Last fall, following the tragedy of 9/11, I began to facilitate a similar group, but of women only. Calling ourselves "Daughters of Abraham," we focus primarily on similarities among our faiths and secondarily on distinctions. Initially, the group met every week and was intended to be short term. However, literally every woman wanted to continue, so we decided to meet monthly. The women have shared personally what their faith means to them, their understanding of themselves as descendants of Abraham and as "People of the Book." We have shared how we celebrate various holidays (including the exchange of

wonderful recipes). One Jewish woman, a Holocaust survivor, recently spoke of her horrific experiences between 1944 and 1946. Most of the meetings, however, involve minimal "presentation" and more personal sharing about a given topic. We have toured worship spaces with explanations of symbols and rituals. The group has continued to grow in number, but more importantly, it has grown beyond mutual education and tolerance to genuine respect and love for each other.

Our common monotheism and longing for peace are far greater than our differences. And, I must admit that more than once, it has been said with a smile, "You know, if women were ruling the world, there wouldn't be nearly so much bloodshed."

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The Daughters of Abraham Group — 30 women of Jewish, Christian and Muslim faiths.

The Right Place

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My experience of receiving God's grace inspired me to become a pastoral counselor. With faith in divine grace and the belief that it is available to all, sitting with suffering becomes more hopeful. It provides a framework for my pastoral counseling. The Gita counsels, "In all activities just depend upon Me and work always under My protection. In such devotional service, be fully conscious of Me."

My spiritual master, A.C. Bhaktivedanta Swami, founder of the Krishna consciousness movement in the Western world, said, "My mission is not to turn any one from the affiliation of a particular religion but I want to let them know more knowledge about God and devotion." For me, he personally delivered the salvific touch of God's grace. My pastoral counseling ministry is an important way of expressing gratitude for grace received.

Another venue of grace is scripture. The Vaishnava scriptural heritage glorifies God and affirms the world in all its complexity. The scriptural message is broad, and it encourages participation in the world with a spirit of devotion to God, a sense of stewardship towards the creation, and a mood of loving compassion toward all living beings. These precepts inform us in our faith tradition as pastoral counselors, and shape our ministries. Through our service, we participate more fully in the mystery of manifesting God's love in the world. As Robert Frost has said,

*Earth's the right place for love:
I don't know where it's likely to go better.*

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Unity in the Counseling Room

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mean all things for good, and how suffering has taught the client resilience and strength. Hopefully, the clients can then better decide whether to be like the pain or to choose again, seeing the Christ presence within themselves and those they feel have harmed them. I ask clients whether the beliefs they hold contribute to peace in their heart or to chaos. If the answer is chaos, we explore and uncover until we can find the peace, until we can find a loving God in every situation and find unity with past, present and future. At this point, ideally, the clients are taking responsibility for their own "creation," enabling them to be forces for positive change, both individually and communally.

Unity attracts many who have dropped out from other religions, some who have been so wounded by their former belief systems, that frequently they cannot tolerate talk of God or Christ-presence. Their spirituality may be a mix of new age, Buddhism, mystical Judaism, feminism, and Christianity. Unity's belief in the Christ within everyone enables me to work within any religious construct, or no religious construct, so long as clients are willing to explore the possibility that their beliefs are not serving them or the world.

A shadow aspect of Unity that I frequently encounter is that clients are hesitant to talk about their negative feelings, fears, and less than loving actions, because they do not want to recreate them. I need to reassure my clients that the counseling room is a safe space, a place where thought, feelings, and actions do not manifest. I assure clients that by identifying their core beliefs about themselves, they are then free to choose whether to keep or discard the belief. At Unity we move from "what would Jesus do", to "remembering who we really are": children of God, brothers and sisters of Jesus, no less, no more. This awareness guides me.

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I pray that none of us faces bloodshed, but if we do, or if our family members do, I am confident that these women will be fully present to and supportive of each other in mourning. We may be step-sisters in the faith, so to speak, but as time goes on the "sister" has become far more important than the "step."

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Pastoral Care and Counseling in Sexual Diversity

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sure their goals coincide with the goals of the client. She concludes to do that, "those opposed to LGB (lesbian, gay, bi-sexual) communities are morally mandated to refrain from harming their spirits or their lives." Gail Untermeyer (AAPC Diplomate) expresses it this way, "To be pastoral caregivers is to hold open the vast possibilities for learning ever-widening circles of inclusivity, justice, and love. As with most communities, becoming an integral part of the healing circle is an honor and blesses the pastoral caregiver as well as the lesbian client or parishioner, perhaps even more."

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