As a PR specialist I have spent decades dealing with volatile front page issues, rancorous disputes and tricky situations — everything from food poisonings and market crashes, to animal cruelty charges, bodies disappearing from funeral homes, exploding sawmills, bankruptcies and sex scandals.

But the escalating state of dysfunctional and toxic dialogue we see today is beyond anything I’ve ever witnessed. We are in a communication crisis. Our warlike approach to public debate is polluting the public square with a dark haze of unyielding one-sidedness. Regardless of the issue, this is the threshold problem because we have shut down the space where high quality public debate takes place, where facts matter, where passionate opposition and science shape constructive, mind changing conversations.

Attacking people’s motives and character, whipping up fear and hatred, distracts the public from real issues and undermines genuine opposition and debate. Sadly it is part of a nasty wave of nationalism and bigotry washing across North America and Europe.

While doing research for my new book, I’m Right and You’re an Idiot, I interviewed dozens of political pundits, philosophers, moral psychologists, media gurus and social scientists. They all agree toxic dialogue and polluted public discourse is an enormous obstacle to change.

While adversarial discourse has its place in a courtroom or an entertaining television debate, these ugly and antagonistic techniques also lead to disabling polarization and tribalism — the two main sources of pollution in the public square.

So what is healthy dialogue?

Social scientists Daniel Yankelovich and Steven Rosell describe a clear difference between dialogue and debate. In debate we assume we have the right answer, whereas dialogue assumes we all have pieces of the answer and can craft a solution together. Debate is combative and about winning, while dialogue is collaborative and focuses

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on exploring common good. Debaters defend their assumptions and criticize the views of others, whereas in dialogue we reveal assumptions and reexamine all positions, including our own.

Debate is about seeing weaknesses in others’ positions, while dialogue is about genuinely searching for strength and value in our opponents’ concerns. It means approaching any awkward or controversial issues with an attitude that we could be wrong and others could be right.

Debate is about seeing weaknesses in others’ positions, while dialogue is about genuinely searching for strength and value in our opponents’ concerns.

When public discourse is invaded by the kind of warlike political PR and ad hominem attacks generally reserved for elections, the opportunity for authentic debate evaporates, says one of Canada’s leading political scientists, Alex Himelfarb. If we spoil the public space and inhibit debate, we limit the public’s capacity and will. In the case of climate change, for instance, deniers don’t have to convince the public that it isn’t happening, they just have to undermine the other side by making it seem proponents and scientists are pursuing their special interests. This shuts down debate.

Similarly, by sowing doubt and exaggerating hazards, a presidential hopeful can use fear to whip up discontent and rage. Trump hurls barbs at the media and the elites, verbally slams women and minorities, immigrants and more. He manipulates fear and dread to appeal to the worst in human nature, and then presents himself as the people’s saviour. Racism and bigotry are like drugs that he employs to anaesthetise people.

How do we clean up our toxic state of public discourse?

The best way to turn things around is by creating an informed and engaged democracy and we do that by opposing any attack on reason, on experts, on evidence and science.

People are not inspired by prophecies of doom, so we need to start painting pictures of a better future, telling positive narratives that expand what people see as possible, that engage people and give them a feasible alternative to the status quo. We need to rebuild the public space where it’s possible to hear a moral discourse and moral narratives.

Social psychologist Karen Tavris told me self-righteousness is a barrier to self-change, and an impediment to finding common ground. It is important to have passionate beliefs because they help motivate us to improve the world, but the key is to hold those views lightly and be prepared to change our minds if evidence comes along suggesting we might be wrong.

Jonathan Haidt describes how our ingrained, tribal behaviors can bind and blind us, and shut down open-minded thinking. We are designed by evolution, and oriented from birth, to band together into groups and teams, and while there is much good to be said for this primal drive, it is also a potentially dangerous trait that can lead to unreasonable behavior, disagreements and violent conflict.

Studies have found banding together causes some groups of people to pull apart from other groups, to not only go to war but to become polarized along distinct lines, whether it’s over gun control or immigration. Once people engage in the psychology of a team, open-minded thinking shuts down. Haidt paraphrased a quote by Jesus: “Why do you see the speck that is in your brother’s eye, but do not notice the log that is in your own eye?”

Vigorous discussion and debate are necessary in a healthy democracy and as Thich Nhat Hanh reminded me, the quality of the intervener is critical. During an interview with the Zen master I asked if we should withdraw from conflict or stop being strong advocates for what we believe in. His answer was brilliantly simple: “Speak the truth, but not to punish.”

Dynamics of the Culture of Fear: Initial Steps Towards Trust

by Louis Kavar, PhD

A lead story in the New York Times on August 29, 2016 captured it well: “Shooting Scares Show a Nation Quick to Fear the Worst.” Even though national statistics for violent crime have declined, when people hear a loud noise they assume that it’s a shooting. In response, panic ensures. Such was the case in malls located in North Carolina, Michigan, and Florida as well as Kennedy Airport within one week during the month of August. Heightened fears lead to panic.

Fear-based assumptions are woven through our common life: the belief that out of control illegal immigration is destroying our society, the presumption that the person speaking a “foreign language” on an airplane is hatching a terrorist plot, and the assumption that a loud unexpected noise in a public place is a gunshot. In the face of these fears, knowledge about the decreases in immigration or the unlikely event of terrorist acts proves to be irrelevant. Instead, fear has grown like an untreated cancer and become systemic: a culture. Perhaps most frightening is that the culture of fear has a purpose. Stoking public fear leads to both power and profit for those who engage in fear-mongering. When society is influenced by pervasive fear, those who provoke social anxiety benefit by gaining power, influence and profit.

Robert Higgs, in his article, Fear: The Foundation of Every Government’s Power, examines patterns among politicians and governments who stoke fears in order to maintain both political power and profit. Enemies are created and suspicions raised about targeted groups. People invest resources (time, energy and money) in attempting to address these imaginary fears. Higgs concluded, “Were we ever to stop being afraid of the government itself and to cast off the phony fears it has fostered, … the host would disappear for the tens of millions of parasites in the United States—not to speak of the vast number of others in the rest of the world—who now feed directly and indirectly off the public’s wealth and energies.”

Higgs’ “parasites” which feed off the public’s wealth and energies are not a monolith. Instead, they have been called the “corporate-conservative infrastructure.” The corporate-conservative infrastructure is composed of a network of right-wing politicians and political groups, conservative business leaders, and conservative religious groups and factions. In an analysis of this corporate-conservative infrastructure titled, Fear Mongering in Politics: A Power Analysis, the public policy project Strategic Practice notes that the toxic climate created is not simply a matter of fear-mongering by pundits but has the objective of maintaining political and economic power.

With substantial forces fundamentally aligned to continue amassing political and economic power at the expense of the common good by maintaining a culture of fear, what response can people of faith make? How do we begin to turn an ideology based on values that the ends justify the means?

It is tempting to fall into an assumption that an equal or greater force needs to be organized in opposition to the corporate-conservative infrastructure. Such attempts can be seen today by various progressive political movements which adopt the strategies similar to those of the corporate-conservative infrastructure. Such progressive groups stir new fears among their supporters: fear about who will control the codes to nuclear weapons or appoint federal judges, fear about who will influence regulation about economic issues or environmental practice, and fear about the future should certain groups or individuals hold power. These political positions implicitly maintain a culture of fear by simply replacing existing objects of fear with new enemies. In other words, rather than labeling immigrants and terrorists as enemies, the new enemies become corporate overlords, corrupt politicians, and various purveyors of wealth in business and financial industries. This response only serves to support the continuation of the culture of fear. All that changes are the objects of fear and the beneficiaries of fear-mongering. The cultural dynamics remain unchanged.

Fear and Faith

As a person whose beliefs and worldview are rooted in the teachings of Jesus, I find that I need to approach the politics of fear operationalized by both the right and the left with great caution.
It’s in this context that I remind myself of the words of Jesus: Fear is useless; what is needed is trust (Luke 8:50, Mark 5:36). Fear brings division and causes us to pull away from others. When we are afraid, we withdraw from the world and try to find safe and secure places. Fear causes us to think of outside forces and people whom we don’t know as threats to our well-being and survival. Fear leads to the fundamental emotional response to fight or to flee. Within the context of the teachings of Jesus, fear serves no good purpose.

Rather than fear, we, as people who aspire to live out the teaching of Jesus in the world today, need to be grounded in trust. Such trust is rooted in a foundational affirmation of the Judeo-Christian tradition: that all people are created in the image and likeness of God. From this foundational affirmation of our tradition, we trust that others are profoundly good even when we may be challenged in our ability to perceive that goodness or when they are challenged in their ability to demonstrate goodness. Yet, if we are grounded in the belief that the image and likeness of the Holy One is at the core of each person, then we are called to approach the other with reverence and with trust rather than with fear and suspicion. In other words, I contend that viewing other individuals or groups as objects of fear is contradictory to our faith in the Divine image at the heart of each person.

**Relationship**

Part of my own experience of moving beyond the culture of fear as an older white man has come from my relationship with others. In my life today, relationships that draw me beyond the politics of fear can be found in my own backyard.

I presently live in residential neighborhood on the outskirts of Atlanta. My neighborhood, a circle of 49 homes, is richly diverse. While mostly African-American, our community is a diverse mix of Asians, Latinos and Caucasians. I’m among three members of the clergy on our circle. Besides me there is an Orthodox priest and a Muslim Imam. There are also several gay and lesbian households. Mine is a diverse neighborhood with Christians, Muslims, Jews, agnostics and atheists, retired people and new couples with children. A few people provide leadership to our neighborhood association. Twice a year we clean-up the neighborhood. In the spring, we have a block party. In December, there’s a holiday party. At our events, there’s line dancing, singing, laughing and good fun. When I first moved here, the neighborhood association didn’t exist. The number of burglaries was high as was the vandalism to cars. Not anymore. Residents walk in the neighborhood, talk to people, and are aware of the normal events in the lives of others. Breaking the isolation commonly found in American neighborhoods has had tangible impacts in quality of life. This past year, as neighbors became more comfortable with the variety of religions, the neighborhood social media group became populated with good wishes to the Muslim neighbors during Ramadan and greetings for other religious holidays. Learning to build relationships overcame fear and isolation which is what enabled vandals to have easy access to our neighborhood.

Research in social science since...
the mid-1980’s has demonstrated that overcoming perceived social divisions that are used as the basis in our culture of fear, like racism, classism, and immigration status, can best be accomplished by intergroup work. Intergroup work leads to an improvement of personal relationships. In the process of working together on shared projects, individuals discover that there is a common ground shared with those different from them. In the case of my neighborhood, by working together on specific projects like cleaning debris in autumn and spring while also having periodic social events have led to a greater level of cohesion in the midst of diversity. Evangelical Christians, Muslims, gay and lesbian families discovered that they shared common values for quality of life, their children’s education, and the care of their elders.

By finding that neighbors shared more in common than the differences which fear mongers insisted separated us, a greater sense of interpersonal connection and friendship occurred. The result has been a reduction in the cycles of fear based on racism, Islamophobia and homophobia as well as an overall increase in community cohesion.

Often, churches and religious communities attempt to overcome the issues of prejudice that underlie the fear mongering common in political rhetoric by appealing to beliefs and morality or by providing education to counter stereotypes. Such efforts have little impact in changing commonly held perceptions that underlie fear based rhetoric. Instead, creating opportunities for people to work with others of different groups on projects allows for the synergy that brings a change of heart and mind.

Because political and other economic and societal leaders benefit from maintaining the culture of fear, they have no reason to break the cycle of fear which characterizes much of the world today. Breaking out of the culture of fear begins when local initiatives bring people together in new ways by working toward common goals. In this way, the words of Franklin Delano Roosevelt will ring true: We have nothing to fear but fear itself.

My grandfather and my great-grandfather were POWs in WWII. My grandfather on the other side was an intelligence officer just before Vietnam. A month before my 9th birthday, I watched and re-watched the Twin Towers crumble. In high school, we added lockdown drills to our medley of fire and earthquake drills—the threat of an active shooter imminent.

My family history and my individual timeline are marked by violent milestones, a narrative shared by many of my peers. By all accounts, the Millennial generation should be cowering at home under the covers. But in the end, fear does not define our world. My generation has grown up in the shadow of war, guns, and other forms of cruelty, but we’ve also grown up in a time of inspiring technological innovation, greater global awareness, and the ability to share resources with others at the swipe of a finger.

I was on Facebook when—I know, I know, another millennial talking about social media…just keep reading—I saw a post that inspired me to act. An acquaintance from high school shared an article about a free community health clinic in MAPS, the Muslim Association of Puget Sound. For months, I’d been preparing to enter a grad school program in Public Health at Bastyr University. My career aspirations surround supporting the intersection of healthcare and faith organizations. When I saw the post about MAPS, I immediately sent a message to my acquaintance, and he put me in touch with his good friend, Nehath, who spearheaded the free clinic’s opening. Nehath and I met up for coffee, had an inspiring conversation, and connected on Facebook so we could keep in touch. I was also able to help set up for the clinic in August so I could see some of the behind-the-scenes work involved in turning a faith organization’s rec room into a functioning doctor’s office.

My experience connecting with Nehath illustrates my generation’s commitment to using new technologies to facilitate powerful in-person interaction. I am not afraid to stand up to violence and oppression as I realize how quickly and meaningfully I can mobilize with my peers. Though I have grown up in the shadow of violence, I have come of age in an era when I am able to co-create a web of interconnected support and resilience.

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A MATTER OF SPIRIT 5

Millenials: A Generation of Hope
The British atheist Bertrand Russell gave a famous lecture in 1927 entitled, “Why I am not a Christian,” and asserted that “religion is based primarily and mainly upon fear,” a fear of the mysterious, defeat, but most of all, death.1

You can often learn a lot from your critics and some of Russell’s criticisms of religion have validity. Some biblical metaphors and images provide fuel for the natural tendency to fear death and what comes after it. Matthew 13:50 speaks of angels at the last judgment throwing the evil “into the furnace of fire, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth,” and in an image worthy of a Wes Craven horror film, Revelation 21:8 describes different groups of sinners getting hurled into a “lake that burns with fire and sulfur.” Meanwhile, 1 Peter 5:8 could traumatize children with its warning that the devil prowls “like a roaring lion … looking for someone to devour.” Such metaphors and images blossomed in the Middle Ages into terrifying fictions of the afterlife. Dante’s Inferno, and Christian artwork that often graced the walls of houses of prayer surely disturbed the faithful as they prayed. Giotto’s, The Devil and the Damned and Luca Signorelli’s, The Damned Cast into Hell are just two examples of artwork that shaped the fearfulness that is often found in the Christian imagination, and inspired Bertrand Russell’s critique of religion. 

Sadly, religious leaders too often used fear to scare people away from certain self-destructive behaviors, and in the process created cultures of fear in many church circles. Mental health research even finds a strong link between religion and certain fear obsessions, such as doomsday and death phobias.2

Because religious belief and practice promise the ultimate sense of stability (in this life and the next), religiously-motivated cultures of fear have disastrous unintended effects, especially among the unreflective and poorly catechized or educated. Lacking a deep understanding of a faith tradition, such people can develop hypersensitive triggers of anxiety to ideas, people, or activities that challenge their fragile, fear-laden inner world of meaning. Fear of people has been the most frequent trigger throughout U.S. history, and Jews, Quakers, Baptists, Mennonites, and Catholics have all been marginalized by other people of faith who saw these groups as dangerous to their way of thinking, feeling and living. The recent rise of Islamophobia is just one more chapter in this sad pattern of religiously-informed fearfulness.

It is more than ironic that “stand your ground” laws have become popular. There is a similar phenomenon in church life. Churches and denominations are finding all kinds of ways to walls of protectionism, not only around their doctrines, but also around their institutions, and engage in behaviors that violate their faith tradition’s moral principles out of a sense of survival or fear of the loss of cultural influence. Pope Francis is well aware of this side of religion, and much of his ministry has been directed at confronting the specters of fear, in and out of religion, and offering pathways to courage.
As he noted in a May 15, 2015 homily: “There are fearful communities that always go on the safe side ... you enter into (such communities) and the air is stale, because it is a sick community ... The lack of courage makes a community sick.” His endorsement of a “risky” faith willing to go the peripheries and to engage the world and its sufferings, makes some people, even some of his own bishops, uneasy. Some are “afraid” that he is lowering the walls separating the sacred from the profane, going “soft on sin,” minimizing the potential consequences of our brokenness and inadequacies, and inadvertently leading the

“Religious traditions have profound resources for overcoming fear, and Christianity, despite having many leaders in the past who lived in fear and tried to stir it up in others, is a spiritual heritage that is ultimately anti-fear.”

... gullible down the primrose path to perdition. But, Francis sees clearly that the Spirit of God does not thrive in cultures of fear, because such communities breed self-righteousness, prejudice, bigotry, and narcissism.

Francis wants churches to become a spiritual farm for planting, nurturing and harvesting a mature and fearless religious faith, where the deep sense of our baptismal call and vocation drive the activities. Francis knows from his experience in Argentina’s civil war that churches, religious formation and education, and a common life of faith have the potential to become megawatt power plants for developing the courage to face any of the terrors found in life or death.

Religious traditions have profound resources for overcoming fear, and Christianity, despite having many leaders in the past who lived in fear and tried to stir it up in others, is a spiritual heritage that is ultimately anti-fear. In the parable of the disciples in the boat on the stormy sea in Matthew 14, the first words spoken by Jesus are: “Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid.” Earlier in the chapter, Herod had just beheaded John the Baptist, making this a particularly anxiety producing period of time for the disciples and Jesus (22-27). By the time I John 5:2 is written, the Christian community is learning more about how to confront and overcome fear. “There is no fear in love,” says John, “but perfect love casts out fear ... and whoever fears has not reached perfection in love.”

Prayer and learning how to love are ancient pathways out of fear, but people of faith have reflected more deeply on fear through the centuries and have discovered other insights that are important. The Christian philosopher Soren Kierkegaard wrote a famous essay called Fear and Trembling, and looked closely at how fear operates in the human soul, determining that fear is deeply intertwined with pride in the human heart and mind. Overcoming fear for Kierkegaard requires trying to increase our capacity for humility as well as courage. The more contemporary Jewish philosopher, Martha Nussbaum, sees the same connections and calls fear the most “narcissistic emotion” in her book, The New Religious Intolerance: Overcoming the Politics of Fear in an Anxious Age.

“Fear is a ‘dimming preoccupation,’ says Nussbaum, “an intense focus on the self that casts others into darkness.” She concludes that “however valuable and indeed essential it is in a genuinely dangerous world, it (fear) is itself one of life’s great dangers.”

Nussbaum comes to the conclusion that two practices are required to overcome fear. One is the development of “rigorous critical thinking,” the kind of thinking that goes looking for the “mote” in my eye before it goes looking for the problems in someone else’s eye. This includes catching ourselves and eliminating the “self-serving” arguments we so often employ to devalue and marginalize the thoughts of others. Second, Nussbaum suggests we develop a “curious and sympathetic imagination,” which comes about through a “systematic cultivation of the ‘inner eyes’” that provide an “imaginative capacity” for seeing the world through the eyes of someone coming from another religious, cultural or racial heritage.

C.S. Lewis once said that apart from receiving the Eucharist, the closest we ever come to Christ is in our encounter with another person. It is in experiencing our common humanity that we recognize God among us in the good, the bad, the beautiful and the ugly, and especially the different that so easily scares us. It is in this habit of thinking and feeling that we learn to recognize Jesus sitting with us in the boat, and we learn that there is nothing to fear no matter how violent the storm around us.

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References:
Fear, security, and violence are not new to U.S. elections — in fact, they tend to be hallmarks of them. During this season’s Republican presidential primary, Sen. Ted Cruz, for example, talked about carpet bombing ISIS and seeing “if sand can glow in dark.” Some protestors were punched and attacked at rallies for Donald Trump. And Secretary Clinton, also in reference to the use of nuclear weapons, warned voters of doom if Trump “has his finger anywhere near the button.”

In the Trump campaign, the ominous predictions of violence and assertions of both real and imaginary danger orbit the demand emblazoned on the red hat Trump and his supporters frequently wear on the campaign trail: “Make America Great Again.” The slogan harkens back to a fictional golden era when America was “winning” and held its rightful place as the lone “superpower” in the world. It is also a lightly veiled promise that society could somehow return to a time before blacks, gays and lesbians, and women made significant strides in equality.

But the slogan speaks to a much deeper and complex dynamic and is, in reality, a tool to obfuscate the hidden injuries of class that, according to Rabbi Michael Lerner, “become dramatically intensified when the underlying psychological and spiritual dysfunction of global capitalism interacts with economic insecurity.”

The levels of income and wealth inequality are staggering in the U.S. and the myth that we live in a meritocracy causes many of these injuries and much of the pain because people come to believe that it is their fault that they have not achieved the level of success they want, i.e., because they are not smart enough or have not worked hard enough.

People are also in pain because they internalize the values of the capitalist marketplace in which people’s value is measured according to their exchange value, or the (Old) Bottom Line. This means by their ability to contribute to making sure the owners of the corporations they work for get the most money and power that they can. This also causes pain on a spiritual level, according to Lerner, because people “desperately want meaningful and purposeful lives and instead are trapped in jobs that do not produce anything of lasting value.”

This leads to fear and mistreatment of others because people begin to see each other, including their family and loved ones, through the same framework of the Old Bottom Line—as in, “What can you do for me? How can you help me get ahead?”

This type of thinking, Lerner writes in Spirit Matters, generates an epidemic of anger, greed, and fear that others can’t be trusted because all they care about is themselves and “to the extent that we have come to believe we can’t count on others, we tend to protect ourselves as much as possible by accumulating material goods, money, power, sexual conquests, or something tangible.”

Rampant individualism and insecurity is, in many ways, the predictable outcome of the capitalist marketplace.
Corporations must adhere to the Old Bottom Line. They thrive when everything and everyone is a commodity, when people distrust each other, and when events and people are not rooted in the past or connected to future possibilities, but only exist in the limited bubble of the moment.

There is a natural instinct to wonder if our heralded public institutions, media, and judiciary can keep this greed and distrust in check. However, as Arundathi Roy argues in the article “Peace Is War” in The End of Imagination, “corporate globalization has cracked the code” of all of our “independent” institutions.

“Free elections, a free press, and an independent judiciary mean little when the free market has reduced them to commodities available on sale to the highest bidder,” Roy wrote. In particular, she cautions that it is a mistake to see corporate media as a mere supporter of the free market.

“It is the neoliberal project,” Roy wrote. “It is the nexus, the confluence, the convergence, the union, the chosen medium of those who have power and money.”

So instead of using their power to curb the culture of fear perpetuated by Trump’s campaign, corporate media fuels it. This is apparent in the billions of free advertising he has accumulated since he began his campaign and in the asking price for advertisements during televised political events. For the Republican debate that took place on Sept. 16, 2015, CNN charged 40 times its usual rate for a commercial spot. 5

People lose faith in democratic governments and institutions and then look to authoritarian leaders and corporate or government mouthpieces who promise to alleviate that pain—and in some ways do so by pointing to others in society who are to blame or, in Trump’s case, also promise to “Make America Great Again.”

### Emancipatory Spirituality and The New Bottom Line

In the face of these fear-based campaigns, many political commentators have been calling for a return to “sanity.” But asking America to return to “sanity” is (in addition to furthering stigma about mental health issues) in many ways rhetorically similar to Trump’s promise to “Make America Great Again” — both demand voters recall an idealized version of America that never was. Telling voters to return to “sanity” is deceptive because it implies that there was actually a time in American history when political decisions were, on the whole, made in the best interests of people instead of profit.

It is tempting to think the fear maneuvering we are now witnessing could simply be overcome by voting for another candidate. But hate-oriented and reactionary political movements will continue until the system of global capitalism fundamentally changes, we adopt a New Bottom Line, and we internalize the lessons of what Lerner calls “Emancipatory Spirituality.”

As much as America seems to have lost its mind, what it must find, is its heart.

And Emancipatory Spirituality is the path there.

It is a type of spiritual orientation that celebrates the wonder of the universe “and the cultivation of our capacities for awe and radical amazement at all that is.” One of the best things faith communities can do to defeat the widespread fear in this, and future election seasons, is to promote practices like these that reverse the script of capitalism and champion mutual recognition and love.

“To see in this way is to recognize other human beings, the earth, and the entire universe as sacred. We do not orient toward them primarily in terms of how they can be of use to our purposes, but in terms of their intrinsic value and our responsibility toward them,” Lerner wrote in Sprit Matters.

One of the key tenets of Emancipatory Spirituality is to dislodge our spirits from the pursuit of wealth, power, fame, or sexual conquest and redefine concepts like productivity “so that they include love, solidarity with others, awe and wonder at the universe, and ethical, spiritual, and ecological sensitivity.”

In other words, Emancipatory Spirituality means out with Old Bottom Line—and in with the New.

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4 Ibid.

Elizabeth Murphy

Tell us your background.

Nehath Sheriff: I grew up Seattle in a Muslim-American Family, and went to the University of Washington for undergrad and majored in Public Health. Now, I’m in graduate school at George Washington University, and am studying to become a doctor. My parents always emphasized giving back to the community. We did a lot of service at homeless shelters and tent cities. My parents always encouraged me to have personal encounters with individuals. These experiences inspired me to go into public health.

My parents are incredibly hard working. They grew up in India, and moved to the United States for work. My Dad still supports his family back in India, which is so inspiring to me. My mom is one of the kindest people I know. She started a nonprofit organization in Seattle called the Muslim Community Resource Center in 2010. Through that organization, we started the MAPS MCRC Clinic at a local mosque in Seattle.

EM: Share about your experience of being a Muslim in the United States

NS: I feel lucky to be from a place like Seattle where people are so open-minded. Sometimes, people will come up to me when I’m wearing my headscarf (hijab), and they will ask me, quite honestly, when I will go back to my home country. I don’t think people ask these questions or stare because they are trying to be disrespectful, I think there’s just a lack of understanding about Islam. When this happens, I try to represent my faith in the best way possible by making eye contact and smiling at everyone I meet and pass in the street.

When I moved to D.C. I became more aware of the covering on my head and felt a little out of my comfort zone, which inspires me to follow Islamic teachings, and showing my faith through action. Islam teaches that even smiling at another person is an act of kindness.

EM: What fears do you perceive the Muslim Community are living with and in giving witness to your religion?

NS: I can’t speak for others, but for me, it is a fear that we’re being placed under a broad umbrella. I think a lot of people generalize about us without really knowing the facts. Islam to me is having the freedom to express myself in whatever way I choose, as long as it’s in a way that is kind, humble and benefits humanity. The most important thing is to show our faith through action, and to let people know that Islam is not what others perceive it to be, but there is so much goodness. My response and my community’s response [to fear] is to lead by example. I’ve noticed that people in my community are becoming way more involved in activities that benefit others.

EM: What hopes do you hold for building bridges and community across religions and cultures?

NS: At the end of the day, I want everyone to realize that we’re all human beings, and by understanding individuals as well as their needs, we can lead by example. We can learn from each other. My ultimate personal goal is to assist individuals that can’t access healthcare. The clinic that my mother’s organization started is one of the things I’m most proud of because it reflects an accomplishment of my community.
Fear is a pervasive reality in our lives. We may experience the fear of a diagnosis of cancer or diabetes, or the loss of a relationship, or power or privilege. We fear harm to our loved ones and children. We fear identify theft, loss of green space, and looking foolish or being excluded. We fear lacking the resources to provide for self or family or growing old or being alone. In addition to these internal fears, we may fear people who are homeless, persons with mental illness, people who love each other and are of the same sex, or fear individuals because their skin color is different than my own. While it is prudent to be mindful and address safety, often we fail to examine and listen to our fears. What are we afraid of? What are our fears revealing about ourselves?

At a personal level, when we fail to look deeply and honestly within ourselves at the underlying assumptions and perceptions that foster and fuel our fears, we enable fear to grow within us like a cancer. In such instances, we allow our unexamined fears to drive our thoughts, decisions, behavior and choices. This is a dangerous path since unexamined fear distorts. Fear objectifies, stigmatizes, and dehumanizes others. It contributes to generalizations. In our unexamined fear, we see labels, stereotypes and negative images rather than see the humanness of the other person or other community, their abilities, beauty, contributions, struggles, and hearts. For example, who do I see as I exit the freeway? A dirty, disheveled, lazy homeless man or woman with whom I am afraid to establish eye contact and one to be avoided? Or do I see a person whose name and story I do not yet know but whose presence invites me to be compassionate, not judgmental.

A crippling aspect of fear is that it allows us to rationalize our position and privilege and keeps us from engaging the other as a person. It supports us to cling to our biases and discriminate. Fear distances us from the other person who is different and justifies us to exclude the other. Also, fear serves as a vehicle to blame the other. It contributes to a divisive mentality of Us versus Them, where Us is right and virtuous and Them is wrong and not to be trusted.

Such a mentality and behaviors are starkly evident in our country’s current political presidential campaign where Othering is practiced daily. Fear of losing control and privilege has nearly eliminated dialogue and civil discourse. In varying degrees, candidates have employed name calling, labeling, blaming, and stereotypes against each other and against diverse populations. Fear has influenced the behavior of avoidance of clear and full disclosure. Also, fear is contributing to proposed policies that are single focused solutions such as building a wall alongside the U.S. and Mexican border. If enacted, these policies will be excessively costly, ineffective and divisive. The toxicity of fear has propelled fierce entrenchment among some of the expected voters. It is imprisoning us to see only binaries such as black/white, male/female, straight/queer, abled bodied/disabled bodied, citizen/immigrant and conservative/liberal. Fear has diminished, even stripped away, our ability to see and appreciate the complexity of life and people with diverse life experiences, values, histories, customs, beliefs and intersecting identities. Far from empowering us to engage difference and live just relationships, fear is segregating us and making us become less reflexive, less human and less authentic.

“To the extent that internal fears are not examined, challenged, and transformed, they weaken ties and healthy relationships crucial to the flourishing of a just society.”

These are powerful and deleterious effects of unexamined fear in our personal and lives and in the broader community and society. To the extent that internal fears are not examined, challenged, and transformed, they weaken ties and healthy relationships crucial to the flourishing of a just society. Consider this situation. Three black youth are walking through a mall, talking and laughing among themselves. What response is engendered in me as I see them approaching me? What surfaces in other shoppers, store clerks and security personnel? Likely these youths will garner the attention of shopkeepers and security personnel? Likely these youths will garner the attention of shopkeepers and security and be seen as suspicious, even dangerous. Without any
justification we may perceive these black youths as threatening and prone to crime and violence. Socialized by media portrayals and images, we may react to them in a guarded manner just because of the color of their skin and the clothing they wear. We may respond out of fear.

In many ways we have built our society on a foundation and history of fear, racism and oppression. Often, people of the dominant culture fail to respect and affirm the contextual realities of the histories, languages, values, traditions, and indigenous wisdom and resources of marginalized groups. Such failure and the lack of historical and cultural understanding engender further isolation, discrimination, dislocation and oppression of communities that have experienced the pain of not being heard, seen, or valued for decades and centuries. Fear promotes and sustains systemic inequities and disparities such as racism in policing, school expulsions, overrepresentation of youth of color in detention facilities and disparities in accessing and utilizing health care services. These exclusionary practices rooted in fear fuel mistrust and can beget violence.

Though fear is a pervasive reality, we are not powerless to remain consumed and driven by fears. We have a choice to live in fear or acknowledge our fears and biases, examine and listen to them and walk in relationship with others different than ourselves rather than stand in judgment against the Other. We have a choice to move from ignorance and unknowing, from fear of speaking out and taking action to naming injustices and interrupting microaggressions or, verbal and non-verbal acts involving discrimination, racism, and daily hassles that are targeted at individuals from diverse populations based on race, ethnicity, gender, class, sexual orientation, language, immigration status or other marginalized identities. These acts may be subtle and unconscious. We have the power to forgive rather than to hold on to and spew anger. We have a choice to love rather than hate, to build community upon mutual respect, trust and justice rather than fear. We have the power to establish a new foundation of inclusion, partnership and equity, building healthy relationships across differences, strengthening connections crucial to the well-being of the community and the development of civic engagement and collective action. Such engagement allows for mutual discovery and growth. In the context of such relationships, our negative assumptions may be dispelled; our biases confronted, and the practice of our negative thoughts and Othering fueled by fear attenuated.

Transforming fear requires a commitment to become aware of and to challenge the thoughts and attitudes born of fear that lie within us that perpetuate an Us vs Them mindset in which we dismiss individuals and communities as Other.

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Dr. Gino Aisenberg is a faculty member at the School of Social Work of the University of Washington and serves as Associate Dean in the Graduate School for Diversity and Inclusion. Also, he is the founding co-director of the Latino Center for Health.
You cannot love if you’re afraid. Sadly, our communities, systems, and world have yet to internalize this simple, yet profound truth. This is particularly evident whenever a crime occurs. We struggle to respond to crime with love because crime gives birth to rampant fear among all those affected by it, namely victims, offenders, family members, and the community as a whole. Victims fear being harmed again. Offenders fear they are monsters. Family and friends fear for the well-being of their loved one. Fear is a particularly painful form of suffering that blocks the free flow of love.

This suffering, it seems, is infused into our criminal justice system which is tasked with facilitating our societal response to crime. Currently, our system tends to harshly punish, which effectively achieves revenge against those who have caused harm. That is certainly one way to respond to fear, though it’s hardly loving. An important question to ponder might be: Is there, perhaps, a more constructive way to handle the barrage of fear that crime elicits?

The King County juvenile justice system is doing something that could potentially move us toward a total system overhaul. There is a growing awareness that severe punishments intended to “make offenders pay” do nothing to bring real peace to anyone. Such an approach merely multiplies the pain and suffering caused by a crime. The County therefore, in partnership with local churches and community groups, has empowered a Peacemaking Coordinating Team to pilot a series of restorative, community-based Peacemaking Circles to resolve some of its juvenile criminal matters, even serious ones.

A Peacemaking Circle follows the tradition of the Tagish and Tlingit First Nation people of the Yukon Territories as taught by consultant Saroeum Phoung. A circle gathers together community members, those affected by crime and the offenders by utilizing a talking piece to dive deeply into the multifaceted issues in play. According to Rev. Terri Stewart, “Circles intentionally create a sacred space that lifts barriers between people, opening fresh possibilities for connection, collaboration and mutual understanding. They allow different voices to come together and explore an issue from many different perspectives.” Victims and families can participate if desired, allowing them to speak their truth and possibly achieve meaningful peace. In this model, punishment for one is replaced with healing for all.

None of this can unfold, however, if fear reigns supreme. If we can overcome our fear, we will offer offenders a chance to overcome theirs, which is equally necessary. An offender’s deepest fear, usually, is to make the terrifying journey inward toward their deeply buried inner wounds and, even scarier still, toward the truth about who they are. Offenders may fear they are evil. Who would want to journey toward a discovery like that? Circles make the path safe.

I have personally participated in a handful of circle gatherings. I am moved beyond words by the environment a circle establishes, one where a young person’s fear encounters loving people willing to speak tenderly and honestly, people who recognize they too need redemption and are engaging in circle as a fellow sinner. Participants additionally wrap around the youth, both during and following circles, bombarding them with feedback about their unique gifts and talents, helping them live into their true being.

Such a context can’t help but allow a young offender to courageously look deeply within themselves to see a startling truth: They are not a bad person at all, but rather a suffering person who is snared in the relentless trap of transmitting their pain to others. We’re all that person to some degree or other. In circle, that reality becomes understood which effectively interrupts the endless cycle of harm and counter-harm. What emerges is a transformative experience, people capable of contributing most beautifully to the community. How can we possibly object to fruits like that? How we handle our fears can make all the difference.

Joe Cotton is currently the Assistant Director of Pastoral Care and Outreach at the Archdiocese of Seattle.
**Hacia una Vivienda Digna y Saludable**
Towards Healthy and Dignified Housing

In response to the Community Dialogues held within the latino community, IPJC is organizing an interactive workshop in Spanish for immigrant Latino families and leaders. We partnered with King County Public Health and tenant rights counselors to address rights, responsibilities, healthy living conditions, and green cleaning.

**Sexual Harassment in Agriculture Forum**

Giselle Cárcamo, Justice for Women coordinator attended a Forum in Yakima sponsored by the Washington State Commission on Hispanic Affairs to address the issue of sexual harassment in the agricultural industry. We hope to partner with the grassroots community as they develop their leadership and strategies to overcome sexism and abuse.

**CommonBound 2016**

In July, Staff member Elizabeth Murphy attended the 2016 CommonBound Conference, a national gathering of organizations and individuals who strive to create an inclusive, just economy. Presenters emphasized that gender, racial, climate and economic justice must all be at the forefront of building the new economy. IPJC was proud to be amongst other faith leaders at a gathering on the first day of the conference to come up with a shared vision of our role in the larger movement. We look forward to the fruits of this gathering, commit to providing resources to a movement for an “economy of inclusion” that benefits Earth and people on the margins.

**Justice Circles**

Women’s Justice Circles

Our grassroots community organizing Circles are currently scheduled to take place in:
- Tacoma: Catherine Place
- Vancouver: Clark County Parent Coalition
- Spokane: Miryam’s Place
- Clinton, IA: Franciscan Peace Center
- Grandview: Blessed Sacrament Parish
- Wenatchee: Sage
- Bellevue: St. Louise Parish

**Donations**

In Honor of:

In Memory of:
Dr. Henry (Hank) D. Dardy, Eleanor Gilmore, CSJP, Rose Gallagher, SNJM, Elinor Sevigny, SNJM
Becoming Peacemakers: A Gospel Response to Violence

Marie Dennis, Co-President of Pax Christi International presented on the Spring 2016 Vatican Conference on shifting from Just War to Just Peace. Marie inspired participants to explore new paths for personal, communal and structural peacemaking. IPJC provided the afternoon session on Contemplative Dialogue as a way to peace and made available to participants the six week Contemplative Dialogue Circle process for their parish or community group.

The day attended by over 200 people was co-sponsored by Justfaith, Pax Christi, Maryknoll and the Missions Office of the Seattle Archdiocese.

Advocacy

- **Faithful Citizenship Voter Discernment Guide 2016**
  Download from www.ipjc.org
- **Catholic Advocacy Day**
  March 16, 2017
- **Eastern Washington Legislative Day**
  January 29, 2017
- **Faith Action Network Advocacy Day**
  February 9, 2017
- **Federal Advocacy Action Center**
  www.ipjc.org

Contact Elizabeth Murphy at emurphy@ipjc.org to find a café near you, or start your own.
Transforming Fear

Invitation
Invite people to gather for a reflection and discussion on fear and courage. Ask people to read this issue of A Matter of Spirit and reflect on the following questions in preparation for the gathering.

- What does “All people are created in the image and likeness of God” mean to me?
- “Fear is segregating us, making us become less reflexive, less human and less authentic.” In what way has my internal fear led to exclusion or blaming of “The Other”?
- “Self-righteousness is a barrier to self-change and an impediment to finding common ground.” What helps me hold my views more lightly?
- “A lack of courage makes a community sick.” How to do I/we understand Pope Francis’ call to go to the periphery of the world to encounter its suffering.

Gathering
Gather in a circle and place enough small candles on ritual table, one for each person present. Consider beginning with a simple chant or song.

Read Isaiah 11:6-9 “The Wolf Shall Dwell with the Lamb”

Dialogue
Leader: “Fear distances us from the other person who is different and justifies us to exclude the other. Also, fear serves as a vehicle to blame the other. It contributes to a divisive mentality of Us versus Them, where Us is right and virtuous and Them is wrong and not to be trusted,” says Gino Aisenberg.

After a pause, let’s begin by sharing our reflections on the first two questions.

Leader: Let’s take a moment to sit quietly with what we have heard.

Leader: Fear is a pervasive reality that we witness in our day-to-day lives. Whether it be in political campaigns, places of worship, social media, or in our own families, fear divides us. Let’s turn our attention to how we can transform ourselves and our communities for the sake of the common good as we share on the last two questions.

Closing Prayer
As we bring our time to close take a quiet moment to consider one way you will work to diminish a culture of fear. As you share please light one of the candles.

All: Creator God, give us the patience to transform the debilitating fear that exists in today’s world. Help us overcome our fear the “Other”, and instead, build bridges. Guide us in our work for a just world in which we transform our “Us vs Them” mindset as we strive be in solidarity and seek liberation for all people. Amen.