

# A Sermon for Seekers Church by Mehreen Farooq

March 19, 2017

## Third Sunday of Lent

I'd like to thank Sandra Miller and everyone here for the opportunity to share some reflections about my work.

For the past seven years I have been working with the World Org for resource Development and Education (WORDE) – an educational organization dedicated to enhancing communication and understanding between communities to mitigate conflict.

One day one of my colleagues looked at me and said, Mehreen what are we doing? It was the day that Trump signed the first executive order banning immigration from seven Muslim majority countries.

Another one of my colleagues had just gotten off the phone with us to let us know that she was on suicide watch for one of her clients...

Over the past three years, WORDE, had set up a small social service agency to provide counselling, mental health and other wrap around services for youth and families from the Middle East, South Asia, and North, West and East Africa.

One of our clients, had been waiting for her mother to apply for asylum status in the US – and with the new executive order in place, she feared that she would never see her mother again. Losing all hope, she had become suicidal.

For a lot of my colleagues, the recent global increase in xenophobia and intolerance, has been extremely discouraging.

That morning I had to remind my colleague – and myself first and foremost – that our work was never meant to change the world. We can only work on changing ourselves. I personally believe that this is the essence of Islamic spirituality – of Sufism – the journey inward to the self.

Of course, one's spiritual journey is never easy.

Rumi said: "When a feeling of spiritual contraction comes over you, O traveller, its for your own good. Don't burn with grief, for in the state of expansion and delight you are spending. That enthusiasm requires an income of pain to balance it. If it were always summer, the sun's blazing heat would burn the garden to the roots and depths of the soil. The withered plants never again would become fresh. December is sour-faced, yet it is kind. Summer is laughing, but yet it destroys. When spiritual contraction comes, behold expansion within it; be cheerful and let your face relax."

Patience and submission – Rumi notes, will help you ride out the tests in life, and help you grow as a person – mirroring the message of a passage in the Quran, in which God notes, "for indeed with hardship, will come ease." This comes from Chapter 94 – Surah Al-Inshira (the Opening). These verses are believed to have been revealed at a time when the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) was enduring several personal hardships that came when he began his Prophethood, and were meant to give him solace. God implies that the Prophet already has the opening to lift himself from his difficulty, through cultivating a sense of God consciousness through prayer and meditative contemplation.

So it is through our faith that we can overcome any challenge.

Interestingly, the particular word here for "opening" is also used in another passage in the Quran when Moses (peace be upon him) is instructed to confront the Pharaoh and he is concerned that the task will be insurmountable. So he asks his lord to

create an opening to make his burden easy.

Its humbling to think that even the prophets felt overwhelmed from time to time and needed heavenly support.

For many of us, I think this has been a difficult period in our lives. And lately, it feels like the tests have come one upon the other: seemingly without a break.

Everywhere you look, our society is very divided; its so easy to get disillusioned.

I'm taking comfort in seeing how some communities are doubling-down their efforts to foster social cohesion, and improve understandings of different faiths, ethnicities and cultures.

This has been the foundation of WORDE's work in Montgomery County over the past four years, when we established our International cultural Center to engage Montgomery County, residents in a wide variety of initiatives that promote pluralism and social cohesion based on mutual respect and harmonious coexistence.

WORDE uses a research-informed foundation for our programs.

What we knew was that community building didn't mean just bringing diverse people together in a room. Social science research suggests that if you're not careful, bringing disparate communities together may actually reinforce the differences between groups, which can further fuel misconceptions of "the other," and increase intergroup tension. To bridge the intergroup divide successfully, in ways that tend to create lasting change, decades of research in social integration theory have demonstrated that several conditions should be met.<sup>1</sup> Folks should be encouraged to:

- Work towards a common goal;
- Participants should depend on each other in an environment where cooperation is expected; and stakeholders are of equal

status;

- Collaborate in an informal setting;
- Interact with members of the other group(s)
- Develop relationships with multiple members of the other group.

To apply this theory, one of the cornerstones of ICC's initial work was interfaith social action. Described by WORDE Founder, Dr. Hedieh Mirahmadi as "Interfaith 2.0" – "Our programs were designed to go beyond engaging faith leaders in theological discussions, to involving communities in hands-on projects to experience shared values."

Our signature interfaith social action program, Youth Against Hunger was originally created in response to the State Department's call to action, "2011 Hours Against Hate" and grew into a two year program, that brought together diverse youths and families to provide more than 800 meals to needy families at each event.

Our objective was to foster a sense of social responsibility, tolerance and mutual respect amongst local youth – while participants collaborated on addressing poverty and food insecurity – issues of mutual concern.

From 2014-2015 our multi-cultural programs were evaluated by a National Institute of Justice funded study that found that our approach of being inclusive of diverse faith traditions has made a positive impact in our county.

Specifically, our programs were effective in:

1. Making people feel welcome, and that they were part of something bigger than themselves.
2. Making people feel useful, and helped them cultivate a sense of purpose in their lives.
3. Providing participants with a safe space where they felt accepted, and free of peer

pressure.

4. Providing a place where participants could learn about cultures other than their

own and make friendships that are active beyond the event.

5. Making people feel they were not lonely or afraid to talk to others.<sup>2</sup>

We have built on these principles for other programming as well, including our community-led model for the prevention and intervention of violent extremism.

Informally known as the Montgomery County Model – we are currently in the process of institutionalizing our program and re-branding it as the BRAVE Model – which stands for Building Resilience Against Violent Extremism – which will now be implemented by the University of Maryland's Center for Health and Homeland Security (CHHS3).

As with other “collective impact initiatives,”<sup>4</sup> the BRAVE framework is built on the premise that no single entity on its own, however clever or resourceful, can achieve the goal of preventing violent extremism while enhancing community resilience and cohesion at the same time. The BRAVE model recognizes that to really make a difference, the entire ecosystem must adapt to meet the challenge at every stage in the vulnerable individual's likely journey. To date, we have over 300 different faith partners and community service partners, working alongside our local police, and other public agencies.

But coming back to my colleagues question – what are we doing here? What is the point of our community building endeavors?

In a 2011 Guerrand-Hermes Forum for the Interreligious Study of Mysticism and Spirituality, my colleague, Hedieh wrote about Islamic spirituality:

“Our hearts are veiled by our egos and our worldly desires. The goal is to eliminate all the veils between ourselves and God. With each test, we arrive at different stages of spiritual development where the ego is reduced, bad habits are

checked, veils are lifted from hearts, and virtues or subtle perception and knowledge of the divine are acquired. By reducing the presence of the self, we aspire to maintain continuous God-consciousness.

Once the realm of the spiritual transcends the realm of the physical, the apparent differences between humanity, religion and society cease and you begin to indiscriminately see God's beauty, His goodness, and His attributes in everyone. To love God, then, is to love all of His creation. By extension, you begin to celebrate and accept – not just tolerate – humanity's differences.”<sup>5</sup>

Community building, then, becomes a part of this. To uplift one another, to be supportive of each other's struggles.

For me, personally, I don't know where I am on my spiritual path, or if I have progressed an inch. But preparing for my sermon today, was a helpful reminder for me cultivate love for God, for His Creation, to have compassion for everyone and to surrender to His will, and to spend my time in service of others.

#### NOTES:

1. (Aronson & Bridgeman, 1979; Cook, 1984; Riordan, 1978)

2. The full report is available online: <http://www.worde.org/publications/evaluation-of-wordes-cve-programing/>

3. [www.mdchhs.com](http://www.mdchhs.com)

4.

Joh <http://www.worde.org/events/guerrand-hermes-forum-for-the-interreligious-study-of-mysticism-and-spirin> Kania & Mark Kramer, Collective Impact, 9 STAN. SOC. INNOVATION REV. 36, 39 (2011).

5.

<http://www.worde.org/events/guerrand-hermes-forum-for-the-interreligious-study-of-mysticism-and-spirit>

