

“Has the story reached thee, of the honored  
guests of Abraham?”

BOWIE SNODGRASS\*

*Has the story reached thee, of the honored guests of Abraham?  
Behold, they entered his presence, and said: “Peace!” He said,  
“Peace!” (and thought, “These seem) unusual people.” Then he  
turned quickly to his household, brought out a fatted calf, And  
placed it before them . . . he said, “Will ye not eat?” (When they  
did not eat), He conceived a fear of them. They said, “Fear not,”  
and they gave him glad tidings of a son endowed with knowledge.  
But his wife came forward (laughing) aloud: she smote her fore-  
head and said: “A barren old woman!” They said, “Even so has thy  
Lord spoken: and He is full of Wisdom and Knowledge.”*

Holy Qur’an, Surah 51:24–30

(translated by Hafiz Abdullah Yusuf Ali)

Being a guest in the home or religious space of the “other” can be awkward. The story of the visit of the honored guests to Abraham’s tent (Gen. 18:1–15) reminds us of the awkwardness that can also accompany being a host. In Genesis, Abraham has to hurry about after offering food to the strangers, asking Sarah to make bread and the servant to hurriedly prepare a tender calf. In Surah 51 of the Qur’an, Abraham becomes fearful when the guests do not eat the slain calf. In both stories, the hostess, Sarah, laughs aloud when the guests foretell that she will bear a son.

In interfaith relations, whether we are present as guest, host, or on neutral ground, there is at first a degree of awkwardness. At Faith House Manhattan, “an experiential inter-religious community that

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comes together to deepen our personal and communal journeys, share ritual life and devotional space, and foster a commitment to social justice and healing the world,”<sup>1</sup> we embrace the gift of encountering God in the other as “holy awkwardness” and an indispensable spiritual discipline of the twenty-first century.

*I. Behold, they entered [Abraham’s] presence, and said: “Peace!”  
He said, “Peace!”*

“Peace!” was at the center of a twenty-minute presentation Faith House Islamic co-leader Juliet Rabia Gentile and I gave to a group of African-American seminary students at New York Theological Seminary. I began by telling them about Faith House for five minutes. Then Rabia taught us that *As-Salaam*, “the source of peace,” is one of the ninety-nine sacred names of Allah. *As-Salaam Alaykum*, “Peace be upon you,” is the traditional Muslim greeting. When Muslims greet each other, she told us, they are invoking the presence of God. Rabia then read us a passage from the Qur’an about God’s peace. Next, we both led the group in saying “*As-Salaam Alaykum*” and responding, “*Alaykum As-Salaam*,” meaning “And upon you peace.” We asked for volunteers to model this and four clergymen in suits came to the front and wished Rabia “*As-Salaam Alaykum*.” She graciously replied, “*Alaykum As-Salaam*.” I explained that when one says a word or phrase out loud five times, one absorbs it and can use it confidently, without awkwardness. So we invited the sixty people present to “pass the peace” to five other people in Arabic. Rabia closed our time together by chanting a beautiful selection from the Qur’an in Arabic. A woman present asked why Rabia was allowed to chant the Qur’an; Rabia replied that her Sufi lineage, the Turkish Nur Ashki Jerrahi Order, allows female dervishes with the permission of the Shaykh or Shaykha to chant Qur’an in public. When we do not enter “holy awkwardness” regularly, we are often left with simplistic certainties and generalized views of other people’s faith and practice.

Later, during a period of sharing, an older woman told me that she was thankful that she had learned “how to greet a Muslim.” In a tenderly awkward moment, a man shared with me that he had once visited a masjid and felt the presence of the Holy Spirit there. I felt our Faith House demonstration had succeeded in creating a safe,

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<sup>1</sup> From the Faith House Manhattan statement of mission, found at [www.faithhousemanhattan.org/faith\\_house/mission-vision-principles.html](http://www.faithhousemanhattan.org/faith_house/mission-vision-principles.html).

shared space in community for people to enter into the religious sphere of the other, knowing God is there too.

*II. And [Abraham] thought, “These seem unusual people.”*

Faith House is not literally a house, but rather a community of “people of all faiths and no faith at all.” We rent space twice a month to host our Living Room Gatherings, with attendance ranging from twenty to sixty-five people, where we share holy days, learn other people’s spiritual practices, and address current cultural and societal issues.

Living Room Gatherings create a safe space where we can experience another person’s or community’s ritual life and devotional space, where we can learn not only about the other but also about our own tradition through the eyes of the other, and where new friendships can begin and thrive. Our “living room” ethos means that you are never asked to leave who you are at the door, and are welcomed into a comfortable space where common courtesy creates “room” for us to delve deeper into our shared reality of “living” together in a world of many faiths.

On our website, there is a link to a full list of all our Living Room Gatherings, with descriptions and some titles linked to full programs of what we have done.<sup>2</sup> Examples of Christian Living Rooms I have led for this group include: “St. Francis: Becoming Instruments of Peace,” “Advent: Season of Waiting,” “Lent: 40 Days for Learning to Let Go,” a service for Holy Saturday, and a ritualized reading of the Song of Songs. We also practice being guests once a month by going on a group field trip, where we step out of our comfort zones and enter diverse spiritual spaces in the city, visiting religious services, lectures, rituals, concerts, and other events. Most of our field trips so far have been to visit communities involved with Faith House, such as the Progressive Muslim Meetup; a Jewish Renewal congregation called Romemu; and the Nur Ashki Jerrahi Sufi Order. When my husband and I had our marriage blessed in the Cathedral of St. John the Divine on January 3, 2009, we invited the entire Faith House community for a celebratory field trip. Faith House also sets up opportunities for people in our community to engage in social justice, such as participating in a Habitat for Humanity build last winter. Faith House has an active online presence through our website ([www.faithhousemanhattan.org/faith\\_house/living-room-gatherings.html](http://www.faithhousemanhattan.org/faith_house/living-room-gatherings.html)).

<sup>2</sup> See [www.faithhousemanhattan.org/faith\\_house/living-room-gatherings.html](http://www.faithhousemanhattan.org/faith_house/living-room-gatherings.html).

faithhousemanhattan.org), Facebook, Meetup.com, and flickr. And Faith House also builds relationships with other faith and interfaith communities in the city.

*III. Then he turned quickly to his household, brought out a fatted calf, And placed it before them . . . he said, "Will ye not eat?" (When they did not eat), He conceived a fear of them. They said, "Fear not," and they gave him glad tidings of a son endowed with knowledge.*

In the Genesis account of this story, the three guests eat what Abraham sets before them (18:8), but in the Qur'an account, Abraham is disturbed to the point of fear when his guests will not eat. When I was a child, my parents insisted that we try three bites of everything served to us. "There will be times in your life and places you will go," they said, "when people will serve you food you don't want to eat, but if you eat their food, they will trust you and let you into their hearts." This advice has served me well, but what about Jewish people who keep kosher, or Muslims who are halal, or Hindu vegetarians, or people with allergies? How is it different for them to be hosts and guests? How do we find a way forward when we are afraid to offend?

Part of the challenge of interreligious relationships is figuring out where we can find common ground and where the limits lie through our collective experience. Like Abraham bringing forth the fatted calf, we long to share our treasures and have them appreciated. Faith House tries to provide experiences in community where each participant can "taste" something of the "flavor" of another's spiritual life or religious tradition, in ways that avoid "spiritual tourism" or breaking religious "rules." We make efforts not to offend.

Faith House ultimately is an experiment. People come voluntarily. Those who do are genuinely curious and convinced that being interreligious is part of our future and something we need to figure out together—appropriately, playfully, hopefully, and prayerfully—in this pivotal time in history.

With the wisdom of having watched the second half of the twentieth century unfold, Phyllis Tickle calls this period in Christianity "the Great Emergence" and believes

the two overarching, but complementary questions of the Great Emergence are: (1) What is human consciousness and/or the humanness of the human? and (2) What is the relation of all

religions to one another—or, put another way, how can we live responsibly as devout and faithful adherents of one religion in a world of many religions? . . . We can not be said to have truly entered into any kind of post-Emergence stability until we have answered both of them.<sup>3</sup>

In these “Jesus years” of my life, from age thirty to thirty-three, Tickle’s second question is where my work, passion, and creativity have been directed; I leave the first question to the theorists, theologians, and academics. I do not have the answer, and do not think there is *one* answer to how we can “live responsibly as devout and faithful adherents of one religion in a world of many religions.” But I am committed to being part of a faithful and thoughtful grassroots experiment, as an innovator and practitioner helping to form Faith House, recognizing that I am part of a larger phenomenon. A 2008 Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life survey found that 70 percent of Americans believe that “many religions can lead to eternal life,” while 83 percent of mainline Christians shared this belief.<sup>4</sup>

God is doing something new, and our calling is to participate in different ways—thoughtful reflection and interfaith dialogue, social justice and community organizing with people of other faiths, and experiments in interreligious community, like Faith House Manhattan. “I am about to do a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it? I will make a way in the wilderness and rivers in the desert” (Isaiah 43:19, NRSV).

*IV. But his wife came forward (laughing) aloud: she smote her forehead and said: “A barren old woman!” They said, “Even so has thy Lord spoken: and He is full of Wisdom and Knowledge.”*

In this new moment, Episcopalians are fortunate to be part of a church with a long history of interreligious relations. Rather than rendering us “barren,” our past has produced fertile soil for new seeds to blossom, and given us some measure of “wisdom and knowledge” for moving forward. The 2009 “Theological Statement on Interreligious Relations” from the Standing Commission on Ecumenical and

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<sup>3</sup> Phyllis Tickle, *The Great Emergence: How Christianity is Changing and Why* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Books, 2008), 73.

<sup>4</sup> The Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life, “U.S. Religious Landscape Survey,” <http://religions.pewforum.org>.

Interreligious Relations reminds us that “prominent Episcopalians were involved in the first World Parliament of the Religions in 1893.”<sup>5</sup> One hundred years later, the Episcopal Bishop of California, William Swing, had a vision “to create an organization whereby people of diverse faiths and from all sectors of society would cooperate for peace and justice for all,” resulting in the United Religions Initiative.<sup>6</sup> In 1997, on the east coast, the Very Reverend James Parks Morton, former Dean of the Cathedral of St. John the Divine, founded the Interfaith Center of New York. These are just a few of the myriad examples of Episcopalians engaging in interreligious activities. The “Statement on Interreligious Relations” provides a wonderful framework for all Episcopalians. Two models, borrowed from a previous statement called “Companions in Transformation,” deeply resonate with the work we are doing at Faith House:

**Host:** “Let a little water be brought, and wash your feet,” said Abraham to the three strangers who appeared at Mamre (Genesis 18:4). . . . As we engage in interreligious dialogue, hospitality must be central in our response. Hospitality means that we listen to what our companions say, offer them opportunities to experience the breadth of our church, and care for one another. We are likewise called to be generous and hospitable with those whom God brings to us, always respecting the practices and customs of our partners.

**Pilgrim:** Pilgrims grow in their knowledge of God, learning as much as they share, receiving as much as they give. The humility of this orientation and the eagerness to learn from companions nurtures deep and lasting relationships. The pilgrim motif opens the door to true mutuality.<sup>7</sup>

Everyone who is part of the Faith House community is part of my pilgrim journey and we are all part of each other’s. We share what we

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<sup>5</sup> The “Statement on Interreligious Relations” endorsed by the 76th General Convention of the Episcopal Church in 2009 may be found at [www.episcopalchurch.org/documents/Statement\\_on\\_Interreligious\\_Relations\(1\).pdf](http://www.episcopalchurch.org/documents/Statement_on_Interreligious_Relations(1).pdf). The quoted passage is on page 2.

<sup>6</sup> Quoted from the history page of the United Religious Initiative website, [www.uri.org/hist.html](http://www.uri.org/hist.html).

<sup>7</sup> “Statement on Interreligious Relations,” 8.

treasure about our faith so that other people can “get” it. We share it as we experience it.

When I enter someone else’s religious space as a guest, I sometimes have the feeling of being on the shoreline, while others swim in the deep blue sea. The more I venture out, the more I feel called back to my home church, the Episcopal Church. It is no better than any other church, but it is the place where I can dive into the ocean. I know the prayers, creeds, and melodies by heart, having pondered them for years.

How can we find ways to share the “wisdom and knowledge” in our Anglican liturgies with the religious other? How can we learn to receive the revelations and treasures of the other? In the Bible, the stranger is not just someone to be nice to, but often one who can teach us to see what before we could not see.

*V. But Sarah denied, saying, “I did not laugh”; for she was afraid. He said, “Oh yes, you did laugh” (Genesis 18:15, NRSV).*

God knows our awkwardness, but blesses us anyway. Sarah did conceive and have a son, and she named him Isaac, meaning Laughter, to remind her that laughter is our response to holy awkwardness and a sign that God is behind the contradictions we cannot grasp.

In Genesis, the story “of the honored guests of Abraham” comes between Abraham’s request to God that “Ishmael might live under your blessing!” (17:18) and Abraham’s pleading with God to save the people of Sodom and Gomorrah. Genesis 19 tells the tale of an angry attacking mob, showing the community’s total lack of hospitality to the guests and recognition of *theophany*, God’s appearance in their midst.

Only when we learn to receive love, respect, wisdom, and kindness from the other, can we become pilgrims, opening “the door to true mutuality.”

