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Narrating Women's Interfaith Agency: Stories of Faith, Transformation, and Vision

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Narrating Women's Interfaith Agency: Stories of Faith, Transformation, and Vision

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PIM 66**

**A Capstone Paper submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for a Master
of Social Justice in Intercultural Relations at the School for International Training
in Brattleboro, Vermont, USA.**

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Abstract

Today in the United States and in the larger world, there is a burgeoning interfaith movement that is bringing people together across religious lines to build relationships and achieve common goals. Despite women's great contributions to this movement, little research has been done to understand their perspectives on interfaith work: why interfaith work is valuable to them, how they connect personal faith to interfaith work, how they have been impacted by the work they have done, and the larger social changes they hope their work contributes to.

Through in-depth interviews with four women who are interfaith leaders in Central Ohio, this paper furthers the study of women's interfaith agency in order to understand their perspectives about their experiences, motivations, areas of growth, and visions for the future. Their stories point to their desire to build a community and world that shares their interfaith values and that reflects their own personal growth as they discover an ever-expanding sense of community with those from other faiths. They demonstrate an immense amount of self-learning that has come from their endeavors to learn about the religious “Other” and to build relationships across religious boundaries.

The learnings we can draw from these women's stories and self-reflections provide materials for understanding not only their nuanced experiences, values, and hopes as interfaith agents, but also how the personal and particular nature of the individual within community are so deeply intertwined with the larger world and larger social movements. These women remind us that women's voices are both valid and vital to the collective self-reflection and action necessary for lasting change in the world.

Acknowledgments

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I. Introduction

A. Origins of this Research Project

This research sought to deeply inquire about multiple interdependent aspects of women's interfaith agency, including: women's motivations for doing interfaith work, how they've been impacted by their interfaith work, and their visions and intentions for their work. My personal lens is as a member of the interfaith community in which I conducted my research, and indeed as a friend and colleague of the women who participated. I am a feminist, a social change activist, a community-builder, and a current seminary student; and I have invested much time in facilitating experiences where people can cross religious and other types of boundaries. Thus, in many ways, I find myself in the research I have pursued here, and both my questions and my data analysis reflect my own approaches to these questions.

In early 2008, I became actively involved in the interfaith movement as an intern at two organizations in Columbus, Ohio: the Interfaith Association of Central Ohio (IACO) and the Interfaith Center for Peace (ICP). In late 2008, I became a staff member at ICP, and maintained connections with IACO. Through my work, I have attended and spoken at multiple national and local interfaith conferences, where I have met peers from around the United States and Canada. In these roles, I have learned to see the interfaith movement both as a larger grassroots phenomenon and as a container for the many individual participants who build bridges with religious Others in their communities. In this paper, I use the term “religious Other” to indicate someone from a religious tradition different than one's own. Being part of such a movement challenges and influences individuals around their own identities and worldviews about pluralism and diversity. As a feminist and woman myself, I have been inspired to focus on the agency of the women participants and leaders in this movement.

Both the feminist and interfaith movements deal with questions of the Other. What are the connections between women, who are Others by virtue of their sex and gender roles, and the work of women to build bridges with religious Others? My interest in these questions developed out of my own experience in my work as the director of the Interfaith Center for Peace. Several mentors have strengthened my conviction that the interfaith movement will benefit from an intimate exploration of the experiences and perceptions of women who act as leaders and participants in this movement. Such an examination of women's experiences, told through their own voices, is resonant with feminist theory and feminist theology. It is also a long-overdue exercise: though women have long been participants in interfaith bridge-building, their voices have not always been given the attention or authority commensurate with their contributions.

Interfaith community-building deeply touches upon issues such as personal, spiritual, and religious belief systems and worldviews, as well as fundamental beliefs about human nature, human relationships, and the divisions in our world. As a community of researchers and practitioners, it's important not only to understand the larger picture of the interfaith movement, but to understand the experiences and voices of leaders and participants. Often, people who do social change work are personally changed as they try to create change in their surrounding communities. Such personal impacts are key to understanding why people participate in social change work throughout their lives, and also offer a perspective on how an individual's work and self-understanding changes and develops over time.

B. Research Questions

Based on the above, this research is about the deeply personal nature of women's interfaith agency, defined for the purpose of this project as the whole process surrounding women's participation

and leadership in interfaith work in their communities. This research project explores how women who participate in interfaith work in Central Ohio perceive and think about their work. The primary research question was:

- ⤴ **How do women who participate in interfaith work understand and make meaning of their interfaith agency?**

I also developed two sub-questions which served as themes for the two interview sets:

- ⤴ **What are the factors that contribute to women's motivations for participating in interfaith work and taking on their chosen roles?**
- ⤴ **How are women impacted by their interfaith work?**

The two sub-questions refer to different aspects of agency: what intentions and motivations move people to act as interfaith agents, and then how that interfaith agency impacts them and, therefore, impact how they will act in the future.

C. Literature Review

1. The Interfaith Movement and Pluralism in the United States

According to Diana Eck, comparative religions scholar and director of the Pluralism Project at Harvard University, the United States has become both the “most profusely religious nation on earth” and “the most religiously diverse nation in the world” (Eck, 2001, pp. 4-5). In the context of this growing religious diversity, a grassroots *interfaith* movement has emerged and continues to develop. Local organizations have formed around the country over the last several decades, many of them inspired by the second Parliament of World Religions held in Chicago in 1993, or by the tragedy of September 11th, 2001, which raised a lot of interest in Islam and pointed for some to the importance of building relationships across religious divisions rather than adopt the growing Islam-versus-America polemic. Eck confirms the importance of interfaith efforts and collaborative attitudes as she points to the difference between diversity and pluralism: while diversity is merely a passive descriptor, pluralism

describes a society in which “this great diversity is not simply tolerated but becomes the very source of our strength” (Eck, 2001, p. 6).

Interfaith groups take many shapes: from nonprofits, clergy associations, and informal discussion groups among neighbors or congregations, to formal coalitions sponsored by local, state, or national governments. Though many of them focus on local relationship-building, some are connected throughout the United States and around the world through larger networking organizations such as the Parliament of World Religions, the North American Interfaith Network, the United Religions Initiative, the Fellowship of Reconciliation, and the Interfaith Youth Core. Ohio itself has an interesting history of religious diversity, as it is home to the first American Jewish seminary, the first American Islamic mosque, the first Mormon temple, and the largest Amish community in the world. Interfaith organizations in Columbus have a thirty-year history of coming together.

America's growing religious diversity and the burgeoning interfaith movement have been drawing the attention of scholars in the fields of peacebuilding, intergroup dialogue, and religious leadership. Many scholars agree with Eboo Patel, an increasingly visible interfaith pioneer and founder of the Interfaith Youth Core in Chicago, who says that religious identity “has emerged as a new challenge...that has already shaped and undoubtedly will continue to shape human relations...in the century to come” (2007, p. 233).

This interfaith movement is meeting a key need for a religiously diverse nation such as ours: the rehumanization, or process of learning to see the humanity within a person, of the religious “Other.”

As Eck states,

In our democracy there is a paucity of institutions to study, educate, arbitrate, and promote the credence of the religious 'other'. Yet for a democracy to flourish, it is imperative that both individuals and groups be enabled to recognize that their own stories may be found in the stories and lives of fellow citizens who may appear dissimilar to themselves. (p. 338)

This is one practical way the interfaith movement is contributing to the growing religious diversity and tension within the United States. In setting up interfaith encounters, encouraging conversation and relationship-building, and in some cases uniting people of different faiths to work toward a common cause, the grassroots movement is providing space for stories to be shared and the rehumanizing process to take place, in contrast to the dehumanization that often occurs when groups have little contact with each other or only meet each other around issues of conflict.

Mohammed Abu-Nimer, a scholar and practitioner in the field of peacebuilding and intergroup dialogue, points toward the growing idea of religion as a source for peacebuilding and the growth in interfaith trainings in conflict areas around the world (Abu-Nimer 16). Though interfaith work may be compared to other forms of intergroup processes, it is distinct from them as it carries with it the weight of individual experiences of collective religious traditions, spiritual practices, and moral systems. As Abu-Nimer explains, “religious identity... can be a source of powerful change owing to the deep convictions that bind participants to their particular religion” (Abu-Nimer, 2002, p. 18). He quotes Gordon and Gordon (1991, p. 3), who describe the unique potential of interfaith work to transform lives:

Spirituality is at the center of the interfaith encounter and is the most powerful feature of interfaith dialogue because it allows change in participants' attitudes....participants often utilize their spiritual identities to pursue transformation or change in their perceptions of a conflict...When this 'deeper spiritual connection' is made in the interfaith dialogue, it becomes the main source for the individual's commitment to social change, peace work, and taking the risks to confront one's own evil. (as cited in Abu-Nimer, 2002, p. 17)

Thus, “the spiritual, moral, and ethical components of any religious identity are powerful sources for generating change” (Abu-Nimer 29). Religious identity among those who do interfaith work is often not a clear-cut or simple label, however. Patel the founder of the Interfaith Youth Corps, speaks of the need for a larger, super-ordinate religious identity (such as “pluralistic”) in addition to

individuals' own personal religious identity (such as Christian or Baha'i). This larger identity that he suggests would focus on pluralism, safety, and respect for all religious groups (Patel, 2007, p. 234). Patel's concept of a meta-identity presents an interesting lens for understanding the personal stories and journeys of the women who participated in this study, as several of them spoke about a sense of shifting or multiple religious identities. Shifting or changing identities might be a key to understanding the rehumanizing process that happens when people build bridges across their differences. Stokes states that in interfaith work, "one must be prepared to be influenced by the Other...one must be willing to be changed" (Stokes, 2006, p. 108). Eck states that through interfaith work, "distant images have become people with faces, voices, and problems. Strangers, in time, become neighbors. And neighbors, even those who differ from us, become allies in creating our common society" (2001, p. 332).

2. Women's Agency, Women's Voices, and the Interfaith Movement

Women have been present and active in interfaith work since the first World Parliament of Religions in 1893 and the blossoming of the movement that has been taking place since the second World Parliament of Religions in 1993 (Stokes, 2010). Today, many American women participate in local, national, and international interfaith organizations. Maura O'Neill, a philosopher who writes about women in the interfaith movement, agrees that "women all over the globe are demonstrating a growing determination to be actors who participate in shaping society rather than remaining victims" (O'Neill, 2006, p. 60). Reverend Allison Stokes, founder of the Women's Interfaith Institute in Seneca Falls and a historian of American religion who is currently researching women's voices at the 1893 World Parliament of Religions, says that "women are crossing boundaries that have traditionally divided people" (2006, p. 104). Despite the vast contributions of women, interfaith groups have tended to replicate, not reform, existing gender power dynamics in the larger society. Men typically take on

formal local leadership roles, and are often the formal representatives for their faiths in international interfaith conferences.

Feminist researchers' attempts to highlight women's voices and leadership does not simply come from a desire to "level the playing field," but is an honest inquiry into what different perspectives women might bring to the interfaith movement. Women tend to have different experiences of their faiths due to their gender and the effects of sexism, thus it is logical to conclude that they must have different experiences of participating in interfaith work and the interfaith community. Just as many women have been marginalized within their local religious communities, "women, women's thoughts, and women's experiences have been ignored and rendered insignificant" within the larger interfaith community as well (O'Neill, 2006, p. 18). One of the key scholars developing a feminist approach to interfaith research is Ursula King, director of the Centre for Comparative Studies in Religion and Gender at the University of Bristol. King has written about the lack of academic focus on women's experiences within and contributions to the interfaith movement. She also points to the practical problem that many of the visible leaders of the interfaith movement – those participating in large conferences and dialogues on behalf of their faith communities – are men. Scholars such as O'Neill point to the absolute necessity of addressing women's particular experiences due to the difference between women's and men's interfaith experiences:

Experience is not only mediated by time and location but also by the gender of the subject. Thus, the first of the feminist critiques of the epistemological endeavor consists of the recognition that men's experience is different from women's experience...If male experience is taken to be human experience, then the theories, concepts, and methodologies which result from this knowledge would distort human social life and human thought...What we know...is what is known by men...Not only are the experiences that underlie our knowledge different for men and for women, but the reasoning process by which these experiences become integrated into our knowledge is also differentiated by gender. (O'Neill, 2006, pp. 14-15)

Several interfaith leaders have confirmed what I have seen from my own experience: that

women often do much of the work, including serving on boards, but rarely are found to be in formal leadership positions. The paucity of women's formal leadership, in addition to the lack of academic and professional attention to women's capacity for agency and leadership, point to an important area for growth and maturation in the interfaith movement. Ursula King (1998) points out there is a great need for research that focuses on women doing interfaith work, and particularly the phenomenon “otherness” involved in both interfaith and feminist work, as both feminism and interfaith work seek to address questions of how to deal with the Other - be it the religious Other or the sexual, gendered Other. Studying women who do interfaith work presents a unique opportunity to explore ways of approaching religious “Otherness” through the lens of a population typically identified as the Other sex in larger society.

In addition to pointing to the necessity of more research on women's work in the interfaith movement, some scholars have attempted to describe a unique feminine role in leadership and social change work. Reverend Katharine Rhodes Henderson, the executive vice president of Auburn Theological Seminary in New York City, suggests a way of naming women's social change work that she calls “women's mode of ethical action” (2006, p. 58). She describes what she sees as a clearly feminine way of pursuing social change:

They so clearly rely on the ripple effect to help create widespread social transformation. They trust the power of the intimate encounter to create life-altering change, human to human, in ever-expanding numbers, until our whole sense of how to be together – 'what it means to be responsible for one another' – is so transformed that we naturally begin to capture it in the very systems we construct to institutionalize our values. (2006, pp. 66-67)

Henderson's research raises interesting points for thinking about women in the interfaith movement. How do women doing interfaith work connect their personal work to having a larger impact? Do they have larger visions for change which inform their interfaith work, or to which they hope they are contributing? What sorts of values do women bring to their work and the interfaith

institutions which serve as platforms for their work? This research project shares the position of these women scholars: that the analysis of the unique role and experience of women, according to women, provides a needed opportunity to contribute to the development of the interfaith movement.

3. The Importance of Storytelling

This research focuses on women's stories as a way of understanding women's interfaith agency. This is a feminist approach that is at once both philosophical and practical. Utilizing stories as a phenomenological cornerstone invites deeper probing within the area of women's agency. Stories allow for reflective questions that are both particular and universal, such as: how does one's personal journey impact one's relationship to self and community – including religious Others? How does one remain committed to one's faith and work to build relationship with those of other faiths? What is the spiritual meaning of interfaith work? How do these women connect personal internal processes to external behaviors and the larger world? How do individual relationships and experiences impact the individual's development of a consciousness for larger social change? The importance of stories and storytelling is confirmed by scholars and practitioners:

Much of interreligious dialogue has, until very recently, focused on doctrinal and theological aspects of religion. Personal information has been considered irrelevant...The reasons for beginning dialogue with the telling of stories are the following: (1) to create an atmosphere of trust, (2) to clarify diverse perspectives, (3) to prevent abstract and irrelevant theorizing, and (4) to discover the points of commonality and distinction. (O'Neill, 2006, p. 89)

Patel also points to the importance of personal stories, and says that:

To be effective, interfaith groups need to link personal stories of interfaith relationship-building with religious groups' stories and traditions to the idea of pluralism and tolerance in order to impact members of the different groups in a personal and spiritual way. (2007, p. 237)

Therefore, focusing on the personal narrative of women helps us to examine a wide variety of women's experiences and allows us to move beyond our expectations and understand women on their

own terms, in the language of their own stories, and in the revelation of their own motivations and ways that they, as women of faith, have been affected by reaching across boundaries of faith and touching the Other.

In fact, O'Neill states that until research addresses personal stories, interfaith theories are inadequate: "Theories of religious pluralism... need to emerge from the analysis of personal experiences...thus, the telling of personal stories is not necessarily a replacement for the theories of religious pluralism, but rather a new starting point in their development" (O'Neill, 2006, p. 92). Such research has an emancipatory aspect, as it seeks the voice and vision of women leaders and, by highlighting their stories and amplifying their voices, recognizes individual agency, and draws attention to those who are often left voiceless in a still male-dominant movement.

It is helpful to consider women's lack of voice in the context of muted group theory, which describes women's exclusion from public voice: "Because men have been the dominant and stronger sex in society, they have structured and formed the language and have dominated verbal communication, rendering women mute" (O'Neill, 2006, p. 44). Highlighting women's stories here is a means of countering their muteness within interfaith work, thus bringing the interfaith movement into a more equitable space. Despite women's active participation since its inception, "with few notable exceptions, the interfaith movement has been a movement led by males and, perhaps consequently, the primary focus in interreligious dialogue has been more on doctrine and creed, than relationship and experience" (Stokes, 2006, p. 103). The personal aspect of this research project is important because personal stories are missing in more traditional academic research. According to O'Neill, "academic attitudes that devalue the personal and experiential as compared to the empirical or philosophical theory have led to the exclusion of women and the devaluing of their contributions in interreligious dialogue" (O'Neill, 2006, p. 23).

The need for examining women's perspectives and experiences comes from a need for true pluralism – one that includes both halves of humanity – within interfaith work. By ignoring women's perspectives, we deprive ourselves of the full picture of what is happening from the individual to the international levels in the interfaith movement. According to O'Neill :

If interreligious dialogue is going to be considered truly plural, two things must occur with regard to values: (1) women's ways of thinking and being must be given equal hearing and respect, and (2) ethical deliberations must take into consideration the different moral perspectives not only among religions but also among women and men. (2006, p. 29)

O'Neill further points to the importance of women talking with women in order to increase their voice amongst themselves, as a first step to making their voices public and highlighting their perspectives in the larger society (O'Neill, 2006, p. 49). This research will further this endeavor.

D. Methodology

1. Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis

I chose to use Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) methodology for this research project because of its deep qualitative approach to understanding how individuals make sense of a particular lived experience – in this case the experience of interfaith agency. IPA is “concerned with understanding personal lived experience and thus with exploring persons' relatedness to, or involvement in, a particular event or process (phenomenon)” (Smith, Flowers, and Larkin, 2009, p. 40).

IPA privileges collecting a deep well of data from a limited number of participants over collecting smaller snippets of information from a larger group of participants (Smith, Flowers, and Larkin, 2009, pp. 51-52). I decided to interview four women of different faiths in order to get a small but varied pool of perspectives. I conducted two 90-minute interviews with each of the four participants, for an approximate total of 720 minutes of interview time. Following IPA methodology for interview schedules, I designed each interview to begin with a participant's concrete experience or

story, then to follow up on that story with reflective questions, and finally to move on to more abstract questions in order to get a big picture of that participant's thoughts and experiences related to the research question (Smith, Flowers, and Larkin, 2009, pp. 56-69). The interviews were divided by my two sub-questions: the first set of interviews addressed the participants' reasons for doing interfaith work; the second set explored how that work had impacted participants. The list of questions for each interview are included in Appendices A and B. My choice of participants is described below in section 3.

2. Approaches to Interview Data and Analysis

IPA methodology's primary emphasis is on the participants' own words and perspectives, and thus IPA permits the researcher to present in-depth quotes as valid sources of insight for understanding the phenomenon being examined (Smith, Flowers, and Larkin, 2009, pp. 43-48). My role as the researcher was to primarily seek converging and diverging patterns of perception, experience, and sentiment among the participants. Secondly, I applied existing theories from the literature review to the findings in the Conclusion section.

In the process of analyzing data to answer my primary and secondary research questions, many unanticipated themes emerged, such as:

- ⤴ the value of women as sources for learning in interfaith work
- ⤴ the importance of reflecting on personal stories both for the participant and the reader/researcher
- ⤴ the myriad pathways to leadership and agency
- ⤴ the dialectical relationship between personal religious identity and an interfaith religious identity
- ⤴ the dialectical relationship between personal and societal transformation
- ⤴ past transformative experiences with the “Other”
- ⤴ relating interfaith work to personal faith and worldview
- ⤴ the value of articulating one's own visions for one's community and the world.

Each of these themes is addressed in the findings analysis and the conclusion sections, where I

also draw upon theoretical frameworks related to religious identity, religious pluralism, intergroup processes, and women's agency. In the course of the presentation and analysis of the findings, I consistently present data from the four women in an order that reflects the appearance of their religious traditions in the history of the world. Thus, they appear in the following order: Rivkah (Jewish), Ann (Christian), Hadya (Muslim), and finally Karen (Baha'i). For their privacy, I have given them pseudonyms, and have left out some identifying details of their stories.

3. Selection of Research Participants and their Backgrounds

I am deeply indebted to the four women who agreed to participate in this study and so generously shared their own rich insights, personal stories, thoughts, and feelings with me. I intentionally chose women from four Abrahamic faith traditions: Judaism, Christianity, Islam, and the Baha'i faith. Each of these faiths claims descent from the patriarch Abraham. Often in interfaith events, people from the Abrahamic faiths are brought together around their common ancestral identity. Typically, these groups only include Jews, Christians, and Muslims. Though it is usually overlooked and excluded from such events, the Baha'i faith also claims to be an Abrahamic faith, so I decided to include a Baha'i perspective in this project.

I chose four participants that I knew through my own interfaith work. I chose them because of their leadership in interfaith work in Columbus as well as for the amicable working relationship I had with each of them. All of them currently hold or have recently held leadership roles in local interfaith endeavors. These endeavors include initiating and organizing community programs and projects, serving on nonprofit governing boards, and representing their own faiths within various local and statewide interfaith groups. A basic overview of their backgrounds is helpful to understanding the diversity of perspectives that inform the breadth and depth of this study:

- ⤴ two were born in the United States
- ⤴ one moved to the United States from Germany as a child during the Holocaust
- ⤴ one moved to the United States from Somalia as a young college student
- ⤴ one holds a graduate theological degree
- ⤴ one is currently pursuing a graduate theological degree
- ⤴ one has served as a formal leader in her own local religious community
- ⤴ one has served the broader community as a hospital chaplain.
- ⤴ one has co-edited an interfaith book
- ⤴ three are religious minorities (non-Christian) in the United States
- ⤴ one is a woman of color
- ⤴ three remain within the religious traditions in which they were raised from birth
- ⤴ one joined her faith community during adolescence
- ⤴ they ranged in age from 49-74 at the time of the interviews
- ⤴ for two, taking a public role in their communities has been a common theme in their lives
- ⤴ for the other two, interfaith work has provided an opportunity to move into public roles both in their own faith communities and in the larger community
- ⤴ three were in transitional periods in their lives at the time of the interviews and described the beginning of a new phase in their interfaith work
- ⤴ two have entered retirement and left Ohio since the interviews, and are now in the midst of shaping their interfaith work in their new communities

They have varying reasons for doing interfaith work, and have distinct ways of connecting their own personal faith tradition to the interfaith work that they do. While there are some similarities among their stories and perspectives, these women have unique perspectives on their own leadership, on their visions and contributions they hope to make in the world and their own local communities. Together, they provide a small but incredibly nuanced sample of some of the different aspects of interfaith agency among women in Central Ohio, which will hopefully shed some light on women's interfaith agency in other communities across the country.

II. Presentation of Findings

A. Motivations for Interfaith Agency

This section seeks to understand participants' reasons for doing interfaith work by examining the stories of their interfaith journeys and creating a larger picture of the dominant themes in these women's lives that have formed them as interfaith workers. It addresses not only prominent experiences that

shaped them as individuals, but also looks at their theologies and worldviews. Theology as a resource for interfaith work raises many exciting prospects for a pluralistic future. As Henderson states,

The way one thinks about the nature of God is linked to the vision one holds for society at its best. Taken seriously and truly enacted, the conviction that there is that of God in everyone has radical implications for the behavior of individuals as well as social systems. (2006, pp. 110-111)

Some of the major themes presented in the following section are:

- ▲ how these women of faith begin their interfaith agency
- ▲ life experiences have contributed to their interfaith activism
- ▲ how they have arrived at the interfaith roles they now have
- ▲ how their personal spiritual development or connection to a faith community over time contributed to their participation in interfaith work
- ▲ what values these women are operating with,
- ▲ how they connect those values to their identities as women of their respective faith traditions
- ▲ how their interfaith experiences have informed those values

1. *Rivkah*

Rivkah's motivations for participating in interfaith work include her interest in other cultures and traditions, her commitment to Jewish principles of improving the world, and also her strong impulse for creating a community that protects all its members. Her love of creative program planning and leadership has guided the roles that she has chosen to take on – from starting her own dialogue group around Christian divestment from Israel, to organizing annual community-wide interfaith events, and also participating on the governing board of an interfaith nonprofit.

Rivkah's first interfaith role was related to social action with a local multifaith social justice organization. She became a local health care lobbyist and really enjoyed the political aspect of that work. Although she had volunteered for several years as a social justice advocate in an interfaith organization, Rivkah's own interfaith agency took off when she could no longer stand the fact that she couldn't talk about Israel – an issue key to her identity as a Jewish woman – with the progressive Christians with whom she was lobbying for health care reform. Her need to voice her own experience

and knowledge, as well as to have an impact on the minds of those around her, prompted her to initiate a dialogue group with her friends about the subject of Israel:

I was talking to two of the ministers...and I said, You know, it's very distressing to me that I can talk to you about everything...but I can't talk to you about Israel...Could we sit and talk about this?... I wanted the people that I really liked, respected, and agreed with on most issues to *understand* what I thought they had a very limited understanding of – what the whole situation in the Middle East was about... So I guess I went into it hoping to at least open minds and preferably to change them to deal with the divestment issue, to get a different perspective on that. But I think as it went along, I became more fascinated in hearing *their* stories and seeing the differences... So I came to want to know more about that, and the people that I thought I could never get along with... and then finding out that I could very much get along with this person, and respect and admire where *they* were coming from.

She described the positive impact that this group had on her:

I felt really good, I felt very positive about that *whole* experience. Got to know a lot of people that I liked. I *think*, I felt, people became more open... We started by saying we needed to know each other's life stories. We needed to know where we came from. And so that took a long time to really share everybody's story and how they saw their religion...we did that *before* we got into the issue of Israel at *all*. And it was an eye-opener to me because there really was a huge difference.

Her dialogue group led to many other interfaith opportunities for her in the community. Today, Rivkah easily relates her interfaith work – both her interfaith social activism work and her work to increase understanding among people of different faiths – to Judaism:

I'm doing some of the things that are valued in Jewish tradition... Making the world a better place, hopefully... Certainly a critical Jewish message is that you were strangers in the land of Egypt, so you have to reach out to others, you open your door. It's more important what you do on *this* earth than whatever or if anything comes after that. It's what happens *now*. You're not obligated to complete the task, but neither can you refrain from taking it on – of making the world a better place... That resonates with me. I mean, I *can't* – I don't think I'm a big enough person like Hillary Clinton. I'm not going off to all the countries in the world and trying to fix that. But I have no excuse for not doing something in Columbus, Ohio. I can do that.

Rivkah's interfaith work is connected not only to her Jewish identity, but to her experience as a Holocaust survivor. She has a clear need to express her voice around this part of her identity and work for understanding within her community, which she passionately described when talking about her

original dialogue group:

At the first one of the meetings, when we first got together in this group that I helped organize, we met and it *was* Kristallnacht, it was the anniversary, and we were talking about all this, and I just felt that we couldn't leave that meeting without their *understanding* how *critical* – I mean, that's the night they took my *father* – so it becomes very critical and personal and I felt that had to be part of any interfaith *understanding* of what motivated me to be there. I mean, it was *critical* that these issues had to be dealt with.

Rivkah explained the connections she draws between her experience in the Holocaust and the importance of interfaith work as a way of keeping a protective eye on community inter-group dynamics:

The link is that you have to always be watchful, and pay attention to what's going on in the greater community... because you know, you can be quiet too long... so that's *clearly* an orientation I think that comes out of my experience [as a Holocaust survivor], that I took from it. People take different things from [the Holocaust], but I took from it that you have to pay attention to where people are – so you *have* to share the story.

Rivkah's concern about “keeping watch” extends to other groups as well, such as the Baha'i community of Columbus, who recently sponsored an interfaith service around the trial of a group of Baha'is in Iran:

They were asking *me* to stand with *them*, and I could do that... I thought it was *important* to do...I know what happens if nobody stands up for *you*, so that means you have to stand up for other people. So that was a *very* moving experience to be there and to feel, I can be here with my *body* and be with *them*... And now I know those people, and I think there's a *bond* there and I think that's important. I can't influence really what would happen with the trial in Iran, I don't think my being there made any difference to that, but it made a difference that Baha'is knew they weren't alone here. That there were other people who were willing to say, Well, you know, here's *my* chance to do something. Just to be there... I needed to be there.

Rivkah described one of her favorite parts about doing interfaith work:

The people – I like the people... the ones I like, the ones I don't like – the *people* are fascinating to me, and interesting. I think it's broadening. It's very easy to live in a Jewish community and be totally – this gets you out of that, and it broadens your horizons.

Rivkah also spoke a bit more at length about her interest in designing new projects and carrying them to completion. It was obvious to me that she likes to feel that her presence, ideas, and labor have

an impact in the surrounding community. She had a leadership-oriented career as a professor at a public university, which she considers creative because she was able to design programs for the school. She has also pursued creative leadership roles in her volunteer work. She feels rewarded when she has created programs that had not existed before, and feels very pleased when her initiatives continue on beyond her tenure. She enjoys leadership positions, has gravitated toward them her whole life, and easily takes on those roles. She clearly identified herself a leader when she spoke about her preferences for being an initiator of projects:

I've always liked to be president of something...I like that role. It's comfortable. Challenging...I like starting from *zero*. And then getting somewhere and knowing that that may have had an impact, that something *happened* because I was involved, and I did something. I started from nothing and got to something. I like that... You feel you've *done* something that wasn't there before... That's very rewarding. It wasn't there, it is there, and then someone else picked it up and it's *still* there. That's very nice... the feeling that I could make a difference.

2. Ann

Ann's interfaith work grew out of a loving and welcoming spirit that she has had since she was a small child. Ann's father was an American Baptist minister, and her family always “welcomed the stranger” into their home. Ann relates her value of inclusiveness to her Christian upbringing, specifically to values of caring for the Other and welcoming the Other. She said, “caring about the other person in your life - and even far away from your life - is something that has been a strong value since I was little.”

In addition to the welcoming environment she grew up in, Ann also had a very early spiritual experience that impacted her so deeply, she was brought to tears when she spoke of it:

I can remember being a little, tiny child, maybe 5, 6 years old, and just lying in bed and thinking “my goodness, what a big world! What a big world it is, and isn't it wonderful?... I had a sense of being cared for. And I can remember just sitting there thinking, “I don't know how to find words to tell anybody – my momma, my dad, or my brother – how good this is, to know that all of us are cared for! And even though the world is so big, it doesn't matter, because God cares

about all of us.”

This sense of not being alone and of God's universal love continued to inspire her as an adult. The themes of inclusion, acceptance, and hospitality became very important to her as she moved around the country and built relationships with Christians of all types. Ann and her husband joined multiple Christian denominations as she moved to different cities. She eventually began to develop a growing sense that spiritual truths existed outside of her own familiar traditions. Thus, her understanding of what Christianity meant grew to include other Christian perspectives, and this new ecumenical identity primed her to include people of other faiths in her circle of inclusion. She described how being welcomed into a group of nuns impacted her own ability to expand her thoughts about faith and her own identity:

I can remember wanting to be part of that, and appreciating being part of that, and at the same time [wondering], Is it okay for me to realize that this is not the only way to understand faith? Their faith community... was specifically a Roman Catholic community, but it was okay for me to be part of that ...and I was assured that it was okay... And I think I felt a freedom then to keep extending myself in other ways. I guess part of that was being accepted as something different. I was a little different for this group, and was accepted. And it was such a reminder then to me of wanting to be accepting. And I think that was another push for me personally to be aware of – Okay, what around me gives me an opportunity to include, to be inclusive?

Ann began her interfaith work in response to invitations from two of her pastors to participate in two different interfaith groups. One was a women's Jewish-Christian dialogue group and the other was the board of trustees of an interfaith nonprofit organization. She accepted both invitations, and soon learned that she loved interfaith work. To this day, she remains active in the women's dialogue group. She refers to her interfaith work as “reaching out” beyond her own circle of Christianity. She appreciates the quality of freedom and acceptance that she finds in her interfaith work, as well as in the other parts of her life where she engages in intergroup dialogue. She said that she highly values the authenticity that one finds in safe environments where people are able to share of themselves, their

ideas, and their experiences.

The importance she places on inclusion and acceptance has influenced where she sees her natural roles in interfaith groups and where her most powerful agency lies. Ann repeatedly and clearly referred to her role of providing hospitality to others as a way of *being* with people and helping them to feel welcomed in her presence. She described hospitality at different times as “reaching out,” “invitation to community,” “extending oneself to another,” and “comfort,” all of which explain why such an important aspect of her interfaith work is about inclusion:

[Hospitality] is a role that I tend to take, and I tend to take seriously as an integral part of a gathering of people, no matter how big it is. That to feel welcomed and a part of a group, without having to work at it, is of real value to a gathering of any kind, but I think with an interfaith group, it's a great starting place. There may not be lots of other things in common, but of course we all want to be comfortable when we come together, so let's make that easily possible... [hospitality] is just part of me, extending myself. And I think that that's letting myself be – BE part of the hospitality as a person, extending myself to the Other...Hospitality is key to the way we can peacefully be together.

Ann greatly values being in a community that shares her concerns for interfaith and peace work. She strives to work on interfaith issues both within her church community and in the larger community. She has been a facilitator of interfaith conversations in order to help people engage with each other around new ideas and areas of difference because she feels that intimate conversations are important to increasing people's understanding, appreciation, and acceptance of each other. Rather than gravitating toward leadership roles, however, she prefers to be a participant in dialogue groups most of the time, so that she is able to fully experience the intergroup conversation without having to worry about facilitating.

Ann wants to contribute to helping shift people's understanding and perspectives about Others. She hopes the interfaith programs she helps organize and the dialogues she participates in will deconstruct and change the stereotypes people have of religious Others. She is very thoughtful and

deliberate about her actions, and is constantly asking herself, “How do I impact the awareness of others?” Part of Ann's work encompasses the sharing and expression of her values and interfaith learnings. She sees the sharing of her experiences as an opportunity to impact others' perceptions of religious Others.

I'm a firm believer that sometimes people just need an opportunity to come together and talk and learn about each other for understanding to happen, for appreciation to happen, the beginnings of acceptance to happen...Maybe I'm contributing a possibility for someone else to think in a different way, open their heart in a new way...that the possibilities for interaction with other people are limitless, so maybe another door opens for someone else, they get a different perspective, or just the possibility of looking at something in a new way... peace in the world, being able to function in healthy, whole ways with each other – I think it takes all of us being open to more possibilities like that.

Part of her interfaith journey has also been a devotion to study and self-education for greater understanding of her own faith as well as the faiths of Others. She sees this knowledge as a key for opening doors to new conversations with new people. As she matured in her own Christian faith, her values of inclusiveness and hospitality naturally seemed to extend to the religious Other. She turned to her Christian scriptures as resources of guidance about the importance of moving beyond one's own church walls and recognizing the connections with those outside her own group. Her seminary education as well as her work as a hospital chaplain have both contributed to her understanding of the similar need for understanding and inclusion all people feel. Within her women's interfaith group, she also reads many books to learn about other perspectives. She finds interfaith prayer very valuable, and regularly prays with her women's group. She has found many moments of learning and transformation by being with people of different faiths – whether they are praying together, or working together on a project, or simply engaging in a conversation together.

3. *Hadya*

Hadya reflected on the fact that she has always felt drawn to other people's cultures and

worldviews: “If I look back in my years, I think I've been always attracted to diversification and to pluralistic thought and interfaith.” Hadya's mother, an internationally-educated doctor, greatly influenced her by welcoming friends of many different nationalities and religions to stay in their home. Hadya also went to a private Catholic school in Somalia, where she was surrounded by children from other countries and learned about Christianity. She moved to the United States to attend college. Her first year at school had a big impact on her identity as an African Muslim woman in a predominantly white, Christian Western nation. She – a young woman who did not even speak English – was plunged into a racially divided community in the deep south, and faced dual-discrimination: white people discriminated against her because she was black, and black people discriminated against her because she was African. This experience of not being able to speak English, and then being excluded by both black and white Americans, led Hadya to feel a strong need for voice and visibility – to be able to express herself and to be known on her own terms:

I went to an all-black university, and it was just – they just really – really they [hurt] me. They broke my heart. Because here I am thinking – okay, we are all the same! And they completely discriminated against us – 'Oh, the Africans – put them in this corner... I could read their body language: “You are not wanted here.” From *both* blacks *and* whites!... I would get angry inside! So that's where that attitude came – that I want you to know me on my terms. Don't assume that you know me.” ... “But my aim was for me to speak good enough English to stand up and to *say* everything that I was seeing and that was wrong. And you know, strangely enough, the way I was feeling didn't stop me from wanting to be part of the group. Didn't make me afraid of voicing what I needed to voice, which was my identity. You know, my “I'm here...I count.”

This need to voice her identity and be seen and respected as an individual became a dominant theme in Hadya's life even after her experience at college, as she moved to different communities in the United States. Her children were among the few Muslims in their area, so school and social activities became another opportunity for her to teach others about Islam. She considers this to be the beginning of her interfaith work, although she wasn't consciously thinking about it in those terms. This early interfaith work was a process of negotiating her and her children's minority religious status,

demonstrating the inextricable link between her Muslim identity and her interfaith work:

My identity as a human being – the *first* identity I have is a Muslim. So, by my presence, it's instantly interfaith, because that's – I would be talking about me, and when I say something about me, the first thing will be “I'm Muslim” ... and I would like to know more about you. Even if you don't want to know more about me, you will see me in your midst ... Coming to America, then, my idea was not interfaith. My idea was I – I live among you, and I need to be present with you... my main point was to be present. I live among you, and I need you to *know* about me, on my terms.

Hadya's interfaith work not only provides her with an opportunity to teach about her faith, but is actually a way for her to deepen her faith by treating all religious Others with compassion. She states that her life is God-centered and that, by doing interfaith work, she is serving God and God's people. The better she becomes at interacting compassionately with everyone, including those that are prejudiced against her, the better a Muslim she becomes. In fact, one of her main reasons for joining her first interfaith organization several years ago in Columbus was to be a more formal representative of Islam to the non-Islamic world. To her surprise, Hadya's interfaith work brought up the very same type of issues that had so hurt her during college – she was now made painfully aware of the tendency toward Christian dominance and bigotry within some interfaith groups.

In addition to representing herself to the world, she was now also representing Islam, and this realization helped her to deal differently with this form of bigotry. Her need for self-expression became more focused on a need to represent her faith with humility. Hadya decided that if she were going to represent Islam, she needed to delve more deeply into her own faith and develop her soul – clear out her own bigotry, her own ignorance, and really focus on the behavior and attitude of servitude required in Islam. She saw her interfaith work as a choice to follow God's commandment to serve his people, in the midst of human faults such as prejudice. This spiritual connection between her faith and interfaith work helped her to overcome her anger at injustice and mistreatment. She started to be able to see people for who they were, and to accept them and stay open to them, despite their flawed behavior. As

she learned more about the other faiths, she could understand more about why people acted the way they did, and she did not take the actions of others as personally as she had before. She feels that she has truly developed herself through this process, and learned to be a better Muslim:

Islam is a very precise religion, and it's a religion of *self*. You know, it puts a lot of emphasis on your *own* soul. And if *everybody* just worked on their own self, we can work together better. So that's what I – my challenge was, let me see if I can work with people – let me put my actions where my words are. And that's what another part of the motivation...Of becoming a Muslim. Becoming a servant of God, completely, totally submitting your will to Allah's.... I put theories into practice. And that was far more challenging, because then you have to fight with your own demons – your egos, your understanding of things.

Her intention to serve others led her to take on a servant leadership role in her interfaith groups. She tried to teach the value of serving God and humanity through her own service on program committees and helping with public events. However, Hadya's role as helper was always on her own terms, and she felt that she was able to distinguish between service and subservience. Thus her attempts to help others were actually attempts to teach others the meaning of true Islamic service. She describes this role as her Muslim duty:

One of the meaningful roles that I have taken was the role of a teacher. And not a schoolteacher, but a teacher of cultural nuances through my actions, teacher of compassion through my actions, a teacher of what it means to be a Muslim, which is total and complete submission to the will of God, and showing the acceptance of situations when things happen ... In roles I chose deliberately to be the helper. Just to maybe teach myself humility, and teach myself patience, and show that to other people.

4. *Karen*

Karen described an instrumental event that sparked her curiosity about world religions as a child and led to the development of her interfaith consciousness at an early age. Her grandfather, a Christian Armenian who had immigrated with his family to the United States as a child, gave her a book about the religions of the world when she was five. Though she was raised in a more traditional Christian family, this book's contents intrigued her and made her want to find patterns among the religions.

Eventually she got frustrated and gave up, but she never forgot her interest in wanting to understand the pattern of the world religions in a way that made sense. As a teenager, she was introduced to the Baha'i faith, which provided a coherent story of the history of world religions, and she converted at the age of seventeen. She describes being drawn to the Baha'i faith because it sparked a "ring of truth" in her soul, and it helped her to understand how all the religions fit together. So it was her intense internal drive for interfaith understanding, a result of the seed her grandfather planted when she was five, that led her to her current faith community.

Another event that triggered her development of openness to other perspectives was a trip Karen made to Denmark at the age of twenty-two to visit a friend from high school. She quickly realized that she and her friend had very different political worldviews, and saw that her own world was "provincial" and that she needed to open up to others. She described it as a "global awakening" that made her aware of opinions and perspectives that were drastically different from her own, but that begged her respectful attention. Because it was a friend whose opinions conflicted with her own, Karen was able to focus on the friendship and not let their differences turn to entrenched division. She explained her internal process, which pushed her further along her path of openness:

I felt sort of knocked off my center of gravity and realized that the world's *bigger* than my little world, and so I have wanted to find a way to be all inclusive, to understand the world, to have a point of view that is tolerant and inclusive of others. My mindset and point of view as a teenager had been provincial. I felt the need to expand my thinking and understand the world better.

Karen's interfaith work in the community reflects her Baha'i value that all people and all faiths are connected and one: "Really the core, the center of the Baha'i faith is this teaching about the oneness of religion. And so, it's that belief and understanding that motivates me to pursue interfaith work." Not only does interfaith work embody her spiritual beliefs, but the Baha'i community has been instrumental in introducing her to the interfaith movement and has strongly supported Karen in her personal growth

toward becoming an interfaith leader. Before starting her interfaith work, Karen had been looking for a way to live out her ideals and to contribute both within and beyond the Baha'i community. Her interfaith work began when her local Baha'i leaders initially asked her to represent their community on a statewide interfaith committee. Karen was not really looking for any sort of leadership role on the committee. She originally accepted the nomination out of a sense of duty, but the role rather quickly became her own as she realized that she felt excited by the work. Almost immediately, she proposed and gathered support for the idea of writing an interfaith book, which she then co-edited. Throughout that process, she began to personally identify with the interfaith community and the people she was getting to know within the movement. The support others gave to her as she worked on the book encouraged her to give back to those people and their cause, which she says has now become her own. She says that the book came to define her as she took ownership of it and as people associated her with it. The book propelled her into a more public arena and led to other requests for her leadership, such as serving on the governing body of an interfaith nonprofit organization. This opportunity with the nonprofit later opened doors for her with other interfaith groups in the area.

Karen stated that, despite the challenges of taking on such new roles, her relationships to the people in the interfaith community are what keep her going. In fact, she identified her connections and relationships with people within the interfaith movement as one of the most meaningful aspects of her work:

I have come to understand or come to believe that the most important work that I do... is relationship building. Building loving relationships between people of different faiths. The whole intellectual aspect of it – of learning more about Hinduism, or experiencing the Islamic faith – is *nice*. But honestly, I believe the most important aspect is building those bridges of friendship. And so, the interfaith meetings and gatherings provide a platform for doing that. They provide an opportunity to get together...and weave those bonds of friendship. I think that's critically important. That even beyond the intellectual and people seeing the patterns between the different faiths – is the heart-to- heart work. I really think that's extremely important.

One of the things Karen values most in her interfaith work is the greater understanding and empathy she gains by sharing spiritual journeys with people of other faiths. Karen described the unity she feels with people when she understands where they have come from spiritually:

Other things that have been very meaningful to me are listening to other people's faith journey...because I realize everyone has started from a different place. They were raised in some tradition or denomination or some belief system – or not – and I can put myself in their shoes for whatever time there is and try to understand how they have come to the place they are today, and where they may be headed, and it sort of breaks down some of the barriers between people.

She provided vivid imagery for what it is like to find that moment of shared spiritual connection with others:

An analogy might be that you're digging around in the ground, and you're wondering, Am I ever going to find that little rock or gem, or whatever you're looking for, and all of a sudden you see the little piece of it, and you say – Oh yes, I've found it! I knew it was there all along!... So you know, it encourages me to keep digging and to find what I'm looking for with other people... [The rock or gem] is just an understanding of the divinity I guess I would say of all faiths, that people say that, Just because I'm a Sikh or I'm a Baha'i or I'm a Hindu, that that same divine spark that motivates *me* and *my* faith, is that same spark that motivates others in their faith as well. And sometimes you can't see it for all the cultural rituals or clothing that maybe is throwing your understanding off – the turban, or the woman who is wearing a chador, or is veiled, or some rituals that they practice. And you're thinking about their religion: This has nothing to do with *me*. That kind of thinking obscures your ability to see the rock, if you will, to continue the analogy. I don't want to use the word “dirt,” but in this analogy, that's what's hiding it. Our lack of understanding is the dirt or dust, so to speak. And then to finally find that divine spark and realize that *Wow*, that's the same thing - between us! That's the little rock or gem I've been looking for – it's the same divine spark!

Karen's inspiration from her Baha'i community has been a major factor in her interfaith work. She energetically describes her gratitude for the amount of support those in the Baha'i community have given her and her interfaith endeavors. The people in the community have provided a huge support system and safety net for her. She likens their support of her to a parent's desire to set up his or her child for success in the world. In fact, she says that it's rarely her acting alone as an individual – the whole Baha'i community acts with her on her various interfaith projects: “Anything that I've gotten

involved with in interfaith arena has been a group effort, and people have supported it as a group effort.”

Karen's commitment to her interfaith work is very strong because she sees how important religion is in the world:

Religion is such an important part of people's lives. It's so foundational, almost moreso than the country you live in. What religion you are – what your belief system is – shapes *so much* of what you do. It motivates people in *so many* ways. It's *extremely* powerful. And if we can all find a way to get on the same sheet of music, I think we're going to have a *much* more peaceful world, a much happier world, a less contentious world... You know, maybe your Muslim brother or sister is really almost just exactly like you, but you just don't know it. They're just talking sort of a different language, using different symbols. Instead of splitting ourselves up and dividing ourselves, and keeping ourselves apart, think how much greater we could be – how much happier we could be – working *together*.

B. Personal Impacts of Interfaith Agency

This section delves into questions of how these women feel they have been changed by their interfaith work. As agents sparking change in their community, these women are also changing and developing – perhaps even transforming – themselves. Addressing personal change deepens one's understanding of the individual's experience of interfaith agency. Some of the major questions addressed in the following section are: What stories do they find important and meaningful? How do they describe their own internal changes, such as attitudes, awarenesses, and emotions? Have there been external changes, such as behaviors? Have their values been impacted? How do they categorize and label the ways that they have been impacted? It seems that some women can describe particular moments in which something changed for them – a light bulb went off, a new understanding was gained, something became clear to them. Other changes seem to have taken place over longer periods of time, and thus may have been less visible, although not necessarily less dramatic.

1. *Rivkah*

When I asked Rivkah about events that had an impact on her, the first one she described was observing a conversation around a point of conflict between two interfaith colleagues of hers, one Sikh and the other Hindu. They were talking about a particular day in which there had been a massacre of Sikhs by Hindus. Rivkah was able to sit back as a third party and observe two completely different perspectives of the same contentious historical event. Because of her personal detachment from the issue, she was suddenly able to see the Palestinian-Israeli conflict in a different light. This experience vividly demonstrated to her that hers was not the only such conflict in the world, and that many other groups are dealing with similar conflicting versions of emotionally charged events and situations. She described her learning:

We're all alike, we all deal with issues, and we sometimes think we're the only ones who have these historical problems that go back, way back, that they have totally different stories... People have their own *stories* of the *same* event, both thinking they have the true experience... I was listening to that [and thinking] My, this is amazing that they feel so strongly about this, and here I am a spectator, and it doesn't have the same meaning to *me*. And I could relate that to the fact that a Christian might well have the same feeling listening to an Israeli and a Palestinian or a Jew and A Muslim discussing this issue...Where you sit makes an enormous difference.

As far as personal change, Rivkah said that all her learning and relationships have helped her to be more open to groups she did not know before, and have helped her rethink some of her own biases and stereotypes:

I'm more open to people of different faiths that I didn't know before, and it's been a very positive thing... I have *experience* that confirm some of the hopes that you have – that people *can* get along... It is very rewarding just meeting people that are so different in their backgrounds. I hadn't had much contact with *any* of these faith groups, really, where I really knew people and worked with them on projects. And I found that *very* rewarding.

One recent event that broke down some of her unconscious barriers was a meeting in which two young Muslim girls spoke about an interfaith summer program they had attended. Rivkah humbly admitted how her prejudices were brought to light and then changed:

You realize your own biases...they were absolutely adorable and they were *bright...* and I'm saying [to myself], Isn't it interesting that I'm so surprised that they're so amazing? I just probably had an image – didn't really know any Muslim kids... I mean, I could have *adopted* these girls, they were just so bright and delightful and charming. And that's a nice experience, to meet people from a different faith group – in this case, one that I have reservations with because there are certain points of *conflict* – and I just loved these kids... I kept thinking, you know, if kids are like that, there ought to be a way to get people together, because they were *so* charming, and really wanting to meet other people, and so young and so enthusiastic. That was very rewarding... It's very encouraging, it's *hopeful*.

Rivkah professed a love of learning about different cultures, and appreciates that her interfaith work has broadened her understanding of religious Others from *their* perspectives, and her knowledge has become much more detailed and nuanced as she has learned some of the great diversity of traditions within religions. While her interfaith work has increased her understanding of many faiths in the community, learning about other religious groups has helped her more clearly define her own Jewish identity.

2. Ann

While Ann has engaged in interfaith work in order to live out her spiritual values of inclusion and hospitality, as well as to try to impact the awarenesses of others, she has been deeply impacted by her own engagement in her interfaith endeavors. Primarily, this has been a personal change regarding her own spiritual development and faith identity, as well as an increased sense of personal agency and her ability to contribute to the world around her. She described some very profound shifts in her own awareness that have occurred as a result of her experiences:

So the kinds of conversations I've gotten to have, the experiences I've gotten to have, just have led me a place where I – that's one thing I can be rock solid about: However we want to describe God in our meager language that we have, there's no one right way, there's no one explanation of truth, there's no one path, there's no one understanding that says it all... I guess I've become so convinced that faith means, for me, an inclusion of the world of humanity, of whatever else is out there in the universe. I know I can never envision the bigness of God. As soon as I start excluding, I'm denying something that's part of God...exclusion to me is denial – either of someone else's humanity, or something's importance.

Ann described a vast expansion of horizons taking place in her heart, mind, and soul as a result of finding new ways to extend herself through her interfaith experiences. She spoke about these changes:

I feel like my sight goes farther. Somehow my heart is bigger. I love those diagrams that people will do about drawing circles and then finding out that there's something outside your circle, so you draw a bigger circle, so that the circles keep being encompassed. And I just imagine the circles just getting bigger and bigger and bigger....just the idea that the circle is bigger than I can *possibly* draw. I can't draw it big enough. And it's – that's how I feel like my heart has expanded over time – it just – it can't be too big. It can't be too big. How else could I describe it? I can't draw a big enough circle, I can't have too big a heart... I think there's a softening – that's the first word that comes to mind. Hard edges seem to get chipped away at. There's a softening of line. How does it feel? Open and light and calm and peaceful, are words that come to mind.

Ann's faith identity has also developed and changed through her interfaith work. Her sense of Christianity was already broad when she became involved in interfaith groups. She considered herself an ecumenical Christian, not belonging to any one particular denomination. Her conviction that there was no one “true” Christianity developed later into a sense that there is no one “true” religion. Her Christian spiritual journey has led her to “a flowering beyond Christianity.” In fact, Ann now identifies two parallel religious identities: “I've come full circle to a place where yes, I'm happy to identify as a Christian, but now I also, also want to add that I have an *interfaith* heart.”

She stresses that her new understanding of her religious identity does not reject her Christian faith. She maintains her primary connection to her Christian faith because it was through the Christian journey that she has arrived at her interfaith heart. Support and care from her Christian clergy remain important to her, and she gravitates towards those religious leaders who echo her values of inclusiveness. She believes it is possible that different religious paths are actually parallel lines that eventually come together in God's sight, beyond our human horizon of vision.

Another area of growth for Ann has been around her own agency. One of Ann's greatest

personal challenges in her interfaith work occurred when she was relying on support from her pastors for an interfaith event she was trying to coordinate at her own church. She described her reaction when they did not support her:

I was really, really disappointed and thought, what does this say about my community I say I'm part of here?...that what I value very, very much, is not valued here...And the positive part then became a real sense of freedom in continuing to spread my energies elsewhere...It gave me a desire to *be* there in a way that accepts people where they are, like I've talked about before, and at the same time, not be afraid to talk about the focus that I was taking elsewhere. I feel like it's allowed me to remain a part of that group and yet feel like I can go beyond that group.

Her initial disappointment eventually led her to take even more ownership of her own interfaith work and to be willing to step out on her own. She describes it as a “wing-spreading” experience that helped her to see that she could be a part of her own religious community but also move beyond that community to seek out a larger interfaith community. These difficulties have led to growth, freedom, clarification, action, and a continued process of “growing up.” She says, “Hurting places *can* become those places that allow for new growth and new possibilities to show themselves. And I guess it's not being afraid to let those hurting places do that.”

Ann finds a sense of new possibilities for society through her interactions with religious Others. She finds her interfaith work opens doors to more conversations with and inclusion of people of differing faiths. Ann believes that the types of conversations she leads and participates in are helping change stereotypes and bridge divides. She is learning new ways of communicating with people who are different than her, and learning new ideas and perspectives about faith, truth, and the world. She is touched by the vulnerability that she witnesses in interfaith groups when people are willing to authentically share their stories, even the painful ones. She also finds a growing sense of her own contributions. One new insight she described is a belief that her unique contributions are important: she said “I am a positive presence.” Another impact is that she is able to better deal with the reality of

tragedy in the world: “now I can accept darkness and variety and light, and I maintain the hope that darkness will not prevail.” For example, she was part of a group in which several young Muslim girls were speaking about their experiences of discrimination in their schools as Muslims. She found their honesty and bravery about speaking to a group of strangers encouraging. She finds her own hope for the future in these girls and in other people she knows who are also engaging in interfaith work.

3. *Hadya*

Hadya says she has been greatly impacted by her interfaith work: “I think these years that I have been in interfaith work really grew me as a human being.” The two key areas of growth she describes from her interfaith work are becoming a better Muslim by learning to deal with painful and difficult situations, and being enriched by her relationships with people of other faiths with whom she shares common spiritual values. Hadya's decision to join the interfaith movement first prompted her to delve more deeply into her own faith tradition in order to understand and live it more authentically:

So I had to think about it – okay, I am going into a community that will look at me as a Muslim, and I will be representing Islam, as God intended. That's how I understood. So I had to first learn a *lot* about my religion. For example, Islam is *very* detailed. You have how to engage, how to sit, how to talk, how to – all these things! So I had to really learn a lot. And so when I made that conscious decision to walk in and sit somewhere as a Muslim. I had to learn a *lot* about my own religion, and how to engage people especially. And then particularly, how to engage people of other faiths.

Though she likes her role as a representative of Islam in the larger, diverse community, it also brings challenges. Hadya has been deeply affected by her minority status as a Muslim and how some non-Muslims within the interfaith community, especially Christians, have at times treated her like an outsider and made hurtful judgments. Some of her main areas of growth had their origin in these painful experiences. One personal change that resulted from her interfaith experiences was learning that she had the power to deal with these painful situations in ways that actually strengthened her faith

and her character. She now finds herself more confident: she says she does not back down from challenges, and is able to take on even more challenging situations as she continues to develop a “thicker skin.” Her own particular faith perspective that such challenges are really just tests of her spirit seems to have been a key part of this development.

By controlling her anger, Hadya became able to rehumanize and connect with those who were acting unjustly toward her:

I'm very grateful about the learning experiences that I had. Because if I didn't have – if God didn't give me the wisdom to understand that this was an experience – I wouldn't have learned the lesson. I would've just looked at it as a hardship or a problem – I hate these people – and then moved on. But there were pieces of – just nuggets of gold.... And I'm thankful for all those moments...the moment that Allah gave me to understand all of that, and to appreciate it, and to use it in my life. Because every single building block that I got, I definitely used it for the next.

Another area of great impact for Hadya has been a growing sense of community and connection with people of other faiths. She says she is undergoing a deep shift in her own life and in thinking about older walls and divisions that she had in her mind, which are now being torn down. She is learning to value many faiths and peoples. Hadya's favorite interfaith experiences seem to be moments of finding connections with people different than herself. She has learned through her work that she shares much spiritual ground with people of other faiths, which has increased her sense of community. One example Hadya related was about her first experience with a Jain:

I'd never met a Jain before. I had *no* idea what a Jain was...when I learned about the history of it, and how it got together – it came about – I was amazed at that. And then the person I got to know was very spiritual, so that was amazing to me, too. And I could see that they're talking about God when they're talking about whatever they're talking about. I could recognize that feeling that they were describing. So that humanized them for me.

She later went on to describe the larger impact this humanizing of individuals is having on her:

I am learning that people of different religions are not necessarily wrong. I'm learning that evil people can be of any religion, including Islam. So that – that is a *shift* happening in my thinking. It's not completely processed and clear – white and black. But there is that slow

beginning of an earthquake rumbling in my mind. It's building, it's building. I think probably in the last five or six years, like shaking the – not the foundation of my understanding of my religion, but the foundation of the understanding of the others. So, it's kind of shifting...But I *love* it.... Because truly, Muslims are not a group of people, it's just an attitude. I think there are Muslims in the Christian – quote unquote – religion. There are Muslims in the Jewish religion, there are – the people that truly submit to God. And it's *beautiful* to be in contact with those people because they are *kind* to you, they are *loving* to you, they are accepting. And they're not doing it for you because they want you to love them back... their standard is set by God, not by man.

4. *Karen*

Karen's interfaith work has greatly impacted her view of herself as a leader and a person who has something vital to contribute to society. Karen spoke quite a bit about her initial reluctance to become a leader. Before she started her interfaith work, she was not very goal-oriented; she was just trying to “do the next right thing” in her life. She says it took her a while to get her sea legs in the realm of public leadership. She needed mentors, because it didn't come naturally for her. After the publication of her book, though, she realized she did indeed want to contribute in the public arena, and she valued herself more. It also helped her “to crystallize my thinking a little bit and understand my own belief a little bit stronger.” She was so moved by the support and encouragement of those around her in the interfaith communities that she wanted to give back to them. This commitment has led her in directions she could not have imagined.

Now that Karen is actively engaged in interfaith leadership in the larger community as well as within her own Baha'i community, she finds people looking to her for leadership. She says that she is always “out on a limb” and going in new directions, and that people seem to want to go where she goes. Now that she has multiple leadership roles, she is concerned about the type of leadership she is providing; she wants to make sure she is an effective, ethical leader. She recognizes that until she further embraces her leadership, she may not be the most effective leader: “My effectiveness is limited by my not embracing the power that people want to put on me.”

She does admit that she now possesses some of the traits of a leader:

I guess one of the elements of leadership is courage - having the courage to step out and do something that's different. A lot of people are reluctant to take that step. They don't want to be seen as different or as strange or as weird or making a mistake. But for whatever reason, I don't know why, I'm constantly out there, on the *edge*, looking for something different, looking for something new. Maybe that's the creative spark in me. I don't know what it is. I find myself doing that naturally, and I find people *following* me.

Karen feels her journey to leadership has been impeded by her being a woman raised in a conservative, traditional family. She clearly describes the barriers she faced as a woman:

I have seen myself being most effective most of my life in an assisting role – I even took a job at [a university] as an administrative *assistant* – you know, assisting other people to fulfill their goals. So that's been a dominant theme in my life. So I have had to *learn* to see myself as capable and worthy of...making my own mark on the world. And I know I made a lot of mistakes [with the book] – I was tentative, I didn't feel capable – I was sort of thrust into that role – but there were people, exceptional people, who supported me and realized – Karen's on a journey! You know, and they realized, here's someone who has potential who has not been professionally groomed. That has been lacking in her life. And they could see something different in me, which helped me to embrace some of those roles and do the best that I could with them at the time. It strengthened and empowered me. I can't say I'm fully realized as a leader – I'm far from it – but I took some initial steps.

When talking about taking creative and leadership roles, Karen said:

It's been challenging. It's also been empowering. Some of those roles when you take them on, whether you yourself have had a personal transformation or not. I'm still the same [woman] that woke up yesterday as woke up today – but people treat you differently. All of a sudden they treat you with some power and credibility. And as they reflect their own feelings about you onto you, they mold you, they – by them seeing me differently and treating me differently – they have shaped me. It has helped me to become the leader that they wanted.

Karen, in her fifties, perceived being a woman as having a big impact on her interfaith work, citing two different aspects of challenge: first, the obvious experience of women being excluded from positions of authority and power in interfaith groups; and secondly, and more personally, the fact that she has internalized many negative stereotypes of women in her own life. Karen began our conversation by stating that, especially in her earlier days of doing interfaith work, women were not heard or valued: “There were many of us women who felt that we were second-class citizens in the

interfaith movement locally.” She went on to say:

I think if I had been born a man, I would have been groomed in a professional manner for the work that I had a passion for. I would have been assisted in many different ways to achieve the goals that I wanted to. And I would have been in a position to take leadership roles in what area of endeavor I was interested in... I was raised in a very traditional household, where it was assumed I'd get married and have children, and work at the drugstore, at a five-and-dime, or as an elementary school teacher, or as a secretary, or something. So I think those gender roles – that template we have in our mind – all of us, men *and* women – affects our work today in the interfaith community, the possibilities that are open to us. That very quickly the men realize they're all sitting around with professional degrees, and the women are not, and so the men assume the leadership roles, and the women assume the assisting roles. That is still playing itself out in the interfaith community and the Baha'i community. That will take several more generations to work through – of women being groomed from a very young age for leadership. And that's not fully being realized, that I can see.

Another impact of her interfaith work is that Karen has learned to see herself as more than simply a Baha'i. As she participated in interfaith groups, Karen realized she was speaking only from within her own Baha'i perspective. Part of the deepening of her own faith through her interfaith work is her growing conviction that to be a good Baha'i, you have to step outside of the Baha'i circle. She explained her evolving faith:

I came from a Christian background, Christianity comes from Judaism, and the Baha'i faith evolved out of this Abrahamic tradition, from Islam to Baha'ullah's message. So I like to think I'm Jewish, I'm Christian, I'm Muslim, I'm Baha'i, I'm – whatever. Being involved in the interfaith movement has allowed me to transcend my Baha'i-ness and to get in touch with my Christian-ness, my Jewish-ness, my Muslim side...that's the direction I'm moving in, in not being contained by any one religion per se, but by *the* religion of the world and my perception of what *the* religion of the world is – the one religion...It was very, very healthy for me to break out of my own faith community and get out there with people who are going to challenge me, and who will support me as well in other interfaith ventures... it's just been mind-expanding. It's been very stimulating.

She went on further to describe how her interfaith work has moved her deeper into her own faith:

It's helped me to be more tolerant, accepting, and open. Before I was involved with interfaith work, I was mouthing the words about the oneness of religion. I was talking the talk but not walking the walk. But actually setting foot into the interfaith arena allowed me to put those intellectual and spiritual beliefs into practice. So it helped me to be the person that I had envisioned for myself in my head intellectually – to be more open, tolerant, and accepting... Now I better appreciate the diversity of religion....I have learned to see the profound differences

between many of us and yet at the same time, I value that, much as I value a beautiful table full of food that's all different and delicious. Some of that food you need to develop an appetite for – and that's an area of growth for me, and for others as well. But it's all food - spiritual food!

This growth has helped Karen see challenges within the Baha'i community to live out their interfaith ideals and their message of the “oneness” of religion. Her interfaith work has allowed her to reflect critically and lovingly on the fact that the Baha'i faith, for all purposes, is not its own distinct faith, but rather a unifier of faiths. She believes that as Baha'is become more involved in interfaith work, they themselves will see the truth of their interfaith message. She hopes others in the Baha'i faith will move even farther beyond their own Baha'i communities, as she has, to embrace the world's faiths as part of their own and understand their place within the larger, multifaith community.

C. Visions for the Future

After examining these women's reasons for doing interfaith work and their descriptions of how they have been impacted by it, this chapter explores how their distinct motivations and personal experiences have influenced what they believe is needed in the world, what they believe is possible to achieve, and how they see their future roles in interfaith work. Their visions add depth to understanding how they perceive their agency and think about their personal contributions. What hopes and perspectives are these women taking into their future interfaith work?

1. Rivkah

Rivkah described her love of creative, innovative leadership for designing and implementing new programs. She also cherishes the opportunity to stand in solidarity with communities that are threatened. Rivkah's vision relates to the Jewish idea of “Tikkun Olam,” or repairing the world: that her larger community would one day be safe for all its members, that everyone would be accepted, and that community members would speak out and support one another. Her recent interaction with the

Muslim teenage girls has given her a strengthened sense of hope that deep relationship-building among people of all faiths is possible, even among Jews and Muslims. Regarding the purpose of her interfaith work, she said:

There's a history across [groups] – not just in your own little group, but there's a history of who you can call... this person-to-person contact, I think that's just invaluable...it's an expansion of your resources. I think that's important. There are resources out there and if you don't get out in that world, you only know the resources in a very limited, small, small, small community... I hope it's a more livable community, more *tolerant*. I guess tolerant is a better word – open – that it's a single community that takes in lots of different kinds of peoples and lets them be. And learns from them and actually makes – friends! I don't know how much of that I'm *doing*, but that's what I get out of it.

Once again, Rivkah connected her vision and her work to her Jewish tradition:

You can't make people *love* other people – but I think there's a *chance* that you can keep them from *hating*... you can put your hand out as far as you can go, but you can't hit somebody else. That just resonates with me. It makes sense. I just think that's possible, and it would make the world a better place... That's the first step. We'll come a long way in this world if we can just stop people from killing other people. What's important is that [first] step of making it better. Hopefully the world can stop abusing other people.

Regarding her role in bringing about this change in the world, she said:

I think you decide how you're going to spend your time – are you going to spend it playing the piano, or are you going to spend your time doing social action? I used to like to [play the piano] a lot, but I find that it seems more important to me that you've got to make the world or your community a better place...it's Tikkun Olam – it's making the world a better place. That's what your obligation is – that's what you do in this world. You have to leave the world better than you found it, if you can.

Although she doesn't quite know what form her future work is going to take, Rivkah certainly sees herself continuing in her areas of working to improve the community. She already has a few ideas for new avenues of work:

I thought, you know, you've got all these interfaith groups. They're obviously facing problems. I know the Muslims are facing problems in Columbus. I think getting into the discrimination issues... I don't see [my interfaith organization] addressing that in any concerted fashion, and I think that might be a way to go... And I kind of think it would be good... to introduce the Muslim element into [the Jewish-Christian dialogue group]. I think that would be good. I think it could work... I don't know where I'm going with it. I really don't have a clear idea, or how

long I'll stay with that or [if] I'll go in a different direction... It will be interesting to see where it goes... So I'm real open. Wherever it goes will be interesting.

2. Ann

Ann has greatly enjoyed working together in interfaith groups to plan events and activities. She finds a lot of energy in working collaboratively with others. Her interfaith work has helped her to clarify her goals, values, and priorities, and she says that now that she has spread her wings, she does not want to “fold [them] back in.” She now has a stronger sense of responsibility to act on her values, and because she feels that her values are important, she wants to seek out more possibilities to act on them. Out of her work and contributions, Ann has developed an understanding that she has something to contribute. When asked what her contributions are, she responds first with attitudes: openness, honest caring, and authenticity; and then with behaviors and actions: hospitality, conversation, hospitality, planning events, and integrating interfaith topics into group settings.

Ann has taken her own personal growth and tried to direct it out to the larger community by looking for ways to share her experiences with others in order to deconstruct others' stereotypes. She says that she, like many of the women in her interfaith groups, wants to take her experiences back to her own faith community to inspire and impact other people.

Ann has throughout her life developed a worldview of connection and interdependence that depends on mutual care and inclusion of the many Others in her life. Ann's dreams of peace and unity go back to her childhood experience of sensing God's bigness and her own tinyness and connection to others. Her interfaith work has added even more depth to this worldview. Some of the images Ann uses to talk about her interfaith journey and work include a bigger umbrella, an interfaith heart, opening doors, and images of expanding circles of vision, love, inclusion, and knowledge. Ann dreams of helping women unite to bring about peace in the world for the sake of their children. She says that

children are easy to unite around. She believes that women are powerful agents of change: “[they have a] *huge* potential for impacting world” because they quickly come together and are able to work together, and they “can change any problem” they unite around. She says it's a “big, complicated, messy world, but if anybody can do any cleaning up, it's going to be a bunch of interfaith women.” Ann sees herself as one of the many women of different faiths who are coming together around the world to say, “Pay attention, pay attention....Appreciate each other, learn together, grow together.” Ann's hopes are not only for the world, but concretely rooted in what she wants for her infant granddaughter – that she will one day be able to cross boundaries and have relationships with people who are different than her.

Ann is fascinated and challenged by the idea of how to effectively facilitate the meeting of different groups of people. Thus, she plans to seek opportunities for involvement in her new community, to take advantage of opportunities, and to invite others to join her work. As she begins retirement with her husband and moves to a new city, she plans to continue to be both a leader and a participant in her new community:

I don't want to let myself fold back in just because I'm changing settings and we're going to be making changes in our lives during this time of transition with retirement. To make sure that I let those wings stay open and find – *seek out* – more opportunities for interfaith involvement. ...I have the sheer luxury of time and energy and interest, and I feel like it would be a crying shame to not take advantage of that and go ahead and seek out being part of a wider group of people.

She explains that she is continually renewed by her interfaith work and that she, like others involved in interfaith work, becomes a “new person each time you come to the [dialogue] circle.” Her hopes for the world, combined with her strengthened convictions about the value of her own interfaith work lead her to this vision for change:

A light can be there that just seems so much brighter than the darkness...I maintain the hope that the darkness will not prevail. As long as I keep seeing these hopeful things, like the Muslim

girls at the listening conference, or all the babies being born, or the women being able to sit together, and I can just see light bulbs coming on everywhere in different faith groups coming together and saying, Oh yeah, we can do that together. These bits and pieces of hope just deny the possibility of the cruddy stuff having dominance. That the possibilities are there. It's very hopeful, as long as there are possibilities.

3. *Hadya*

Hadya describes herself as a servant-leader and a teacher who teaches through her example of service and humility. She is an ardent lover of people, the world, and God. Hadya says that she will soon turn 50, and she understands that with this milestone, she will be expected to give even more in deeper service to God and God's people. She says, "I definitely see more work for me, in terms of growth and self-control or crystallizing my thoughts and really I think I'm entering a different phase in my life." Her immediate path is not clear to her:

I know the end product that I want, but I don't know yet how to get there, mainly because I didn't sit down and think through the process, because I want to do it with other people. I don't want to do it by myself, cause it's hard to create something and then go and share it. You know, it's easier to walk along the path together.

She believes that real change is going to come through people being authentic with each other and working together: "And I can work with a person like that because whatever we do will be real. And it doesn't matter if it's just one inch of work if you do in a lifetime...but that is lasting, everlasting."

Though Hadya did not initially seek leadership roles in her interfaith work, she now finds herself wanting to lead collaboratively with those people who share her affinity for "real action" for change in the world. As she becomes more involved in activities that suit her own visions, she is drawn to and excited by leadership roles. Most recently Hadya has accepted a position on the board of an interfaith nonprofit. She is very excited to have a policy-making and decision-making role. She is already planning a new youth project, working on a conference, and developing her administrative and fundraising skills in order to improve the long-term financial sustainability of the organization.

One of the areas that Hadya hopes to focus on is through her work as a mentor to young people, particularly young women. She loves being able to see how the younger generations develop over time. She described her vision for working with girls and young women of different faiths as giving them the tools to create a more just and peaceful society:

I would like to build or help build or be part of the builders that... start a leadership [program] for women. Young women, youth, concentrating on girls. To *showing* them the power that they have. Making them understand that the world can be a better place if they teach their sons how to be good people. I mean that's the power that god gave us. At one point any man in the world was under the control of a woman. So if a *woman* can have the tools necessary to transfer [God's law of justice] to [her son], can you imagine the world? That's what I want to do. I know it's a big thing... [to] show women their power that God gave them, [be]cause they're so *busy* being standardized by men, being objectified.... You know, Allah says in the Qur'an that...he put a piece of himself in us, in women, in the womb. That's why the woman is called "rahma" - mercy... so He gave a piece of his mercy in the womb of the woman. That's why [when] you are in [the womb], [it's] the most peaceful place you'll ever be...all your needs are met! And the woman has that! She's got a *divine* piece in her! And they [girls] are so easily broken at that time – you know, from 11, once they mature, get their period, until 19, until they get a strong sense of self. They are *so* vulnerable, and society preys on them at that time... Can you imagine if you can teach them tools to hold onto themselves in that time?

Hadya provided two images from the natural world that have come to her as lessons from her interfaith work and that guide her visions for the future. The first image is a human hand:

When you pray for wisdom, when you pray for understanding, God shows it to you in the most easiest, simplest, ordinary thing. I mean, I've known my fingers since I was born, but I've never thought about them as an analogy for diversity, or the *need* of being a pluralistic, diverse place. I don't want to change anybody from their religion to Islam. I don't. I think that's not my job. I think if God intended us to be all the same, he would have made us all the same. That's truly what I believe. And if – I use as a metaphor the hand, you know? Each finger is similar – they have phalanges, they have lines, they have – but each finger is different. And you know, you don't pay attention to your pinky, but if it's hurting, all of a sudden you are clumsy in doing things – or your thumb. So that means we are all so *needed!* Each finger is needed in this process of hand to work. So that's how I feel in terms of interfaith and different religions and things like that.... The diversity of humanity is in our hand. We are the fingers! ...If we work together, we can achieve a lot of things.

She went on to describe the second image of nature that was revealed to her as an analogy for understanding how individuals can have an impact on their society:

But you know, another [piece of wisdom] was that the persistence of kindness and gentleness. It was – I understood one day about a blade of grass coming through the earth. I said – Look! I can, I can squish grass and it will disintegrate. But look at the *power* that it had – earth opens up. This crust [is] hard, *hard!* You know, ground! Opens and the thing comes through. And that shows – Okay, you have to be gentle, and kind, and just do your thing. Just – you know – focus on God... And I find that when I succeed, I'm a better person. When I win the fight, the internal fight, to do the right thing...step by step conquering my little soul, and becoming a better soul... When God gave me my [soul] it was like a – you know this is how I look at – you might think it's crazy – but it's like a disco ball. You know, that brilliant, multifaceted, shimmering thing. That's, that's the beauty of my soul. And then as I went through life and made mistakes and did all kinds of willful, ugly things, there was mud splattered over, so the shimmering, the shining kind of got opaque and dark. And in some parts, the mud is so thick that it's crusted, and in other parts, it's still shining. And I feel that being – with groups of other humans that have the same mind of me as God, [the] conscience of Allah, it helps me polish the mud off. So I feel like God's – lately, that my disco ball is kind of like almost looking like – you know, there a whole, I know that a good, a nice portion of it is shining.

Hadya's desire to be a better Muslim and contribute to a better world combine in her vision for society:

One very far away hope that when I articulate seems fake because it's *so* far away – is that humans will remember that they are brothers, and work together as one hand – the fingers of one hand. But I think one close – a little closer hope – is that I will be a better person in the scheme of things and definitely pass to my children the *need* to help... to raise healthy kids that are aware, can look around, and then feel the need to fix things, to give of their time. And I'm making concentric circles starting from myself. So my hope is to be a better person. I don't think I am, I mean to my standard. And knowledgeable, kinder, definitely...and then my children... as the circle gets larger, the communities show up – [starting with] the Muslim community... God tells us there is a goodness in everybody. So the way I see it is that I'm a miner – I'm looking for that diamond in the person... this is my service to humanity, and I'll do the best I can.

4. Karen

Karen's reasons for doing interfaith work – her powerful vision of religious unity combined with her personal faith – have been ignited by her new-found sense of agency and her experiences of leadership. Karen believes that her service will deepen in the near future, as she enters a new phase in life. She states that the next 20 years will hopefully be her most profound years of service, as she retires and relocates to a new city. She describes her vision for organizing an interfaith group in her

new community:

I'm starting to see that in my new home, my role will be to start where we were in Columbus twenty-five years ago – which is the very ground-level basic work of meeting, hopefully, God willing, with people at a mosque, maybe meeting with an imam, going to a synagogue, finding a rabbi who's interested in interfaith work...So I see my role as doing some of that ground-level work to start an interfaith group that's really focused on interfaith dialogue. That would be our primary mission – that spiritual, heart-to-heart work that goes on between people of different faiths. Everyday I'm thinking about how to make that a reality.

As a person with an interfaith vision, Karen sees herself as the bearer of this collaborative vision for the world of moving from suffering and alienation to happiness and peace:

People are very agitated today because of all the change in the world. And people have various responses to being agitated. Some people blow things up, you know, form enemies and get very hardened in their own religious beliefs and believe everyone else is an infidel and so forth. On the other hand, I want to be a force that is hopefully bringing more love into the world. Bringing more understanding, and, you know, breaking down the barriers that separate us. I'd like to work in that arena ... [I'm trying to] break down social and religious barriers and find ways to strengthen our unity and strengthen our oneness – one people, one God, one religion – but not in some kind of uniform way where we're all the same. But by embracing our diversity, our own creative solutions, in an inclusive and loving way... I've come to believe that the interfaith movement is really pushing back against religious extremism...and that we're doing the *exact opposite*, the polar opposite, of what the terrorists and the extremists are doing. Where they are destroying and they are solidifying the lines between people, hardening the lines, hardening the hearts between people, the interfaith community and the interfaith movement is *all* about erasing lines, being inclusive, being loving, embracing all. We need that balance in the world. We have fanaticism in the world, and I'd like to do something to counter that, and be a counter-balance in the world. I think that's a very valuable contribution that the interfaith movement can make.

She described her personal role in guiding the interfaith movement forward:

This is about building something positive in our world. You know, bringing peace and bringing love into this world. And honestly, if I wanted to tell you, I have suffered from not enough love in this world, not enough love in my life, so I know what I mean when I say there's not enough love in this world. And that's a personal journey for me, a personal commitment to make this world a better place. In some ways – in *some* way – whatever way it is – that when I die, I hope to feel like I did what I could, I saw something that needed to be improved in this world, and I did it... that I did something positive, did something to hopefully make this world a better place, for the people who come after us, for the people who are here today. There's an awful lot of suffering in this world, I've had my fair share of it, and you know, if there's something I can do to help, I'd like to try to find some healing for this broken world. We live in a broken, fractured world, with not enough love, and the question is - What can I do to help heal the world?... [By]

finding ways to build bridges between people who are profoundly different. Realizing that, you know what- we may never get there in my lifetime, and I accept that. But we're moving in that direction – we as a people, as a world, are on that journey, and I want to find what little steps in my little sphere of operation that I can take to move us along what I think is a God-directed path. I believe God would like us to move in this direction towards more connection between each other, more love between each other, more love in the world, and more understanding in the world. Certainly God is not looking for uniformity – God's creation in *no* way speaks to uniformity, but to diversity and appreciation of differences. And at the same time, more love. I think there's one thing that's lacking in this world – and that is more love. We need more love. It could solve so many of the world's problems and provide so much healing in the world.

Her personal faith in God's guidance and love gives her strength to carry her vision forward:

It is my firm belief that God does not leave us alone. That God has, even as *recently* as 160 years ago, which is phenomenal – God has fulfilled the promises He, She, or It made to us centuries ago. Wow! That blows my mind! And I think that if God has not left us alone, [if] He, She, or It has promised to *not* leave us alone, that there's hope for the future. And many of these teaching that came through Baha'ullah...were exactly the prescription we need to heal our broken world. And if we keep putting one foot in front of the other on that path, we will eventually get there. Every day is a new beginning. And it gives me hope that the world's going to be okay. We're going through some very dark times right now. But Baha'is believe that these are the 'birth pangs' of a world civilization, that – much like a mother delivering a child – there's agony, there's screaming, there's – you know, she thinks she's going to die. It's a very dark, very difficult time. And yet, at the end, I believe we're in the process of giving birth to a new civilization, the promised kingdom of God on Earth. I have hope for that vision of the future. I do believe we will get there, and that God is holding our hand. I believe he is holding our hand through this process, and we will get there.

III. Analysis of Findings

A. Motivations for Interfaith Agency

1. Early Experiences of and Interest in the “Other”

The women in this study had distinct paths to interfaith work, but all of them referred back to childhood experiences related to faith communities, family, and, as they grew older, communities of other faiths as the big influences in their journeys to becoming interfaith workers. Particular spiritual and life experiences impacted these women's worldviews in childhood and adulthood. Many describe having always been drawn to other cultures, countries, or other faiths. All four women described

childhood and young adult experiences that related to their current interfaith work – particularly, learning an openness to others directly from parents, grandparents, or immediate life circumstances. While they were not necessarily all interfaith experiences, they were early boundary-crossing experiences that opened the girls up to different peoples and ways of viewing the world. In adulthood, all the women described a deepening interest in other groups and cultures, as well as new intergroup experiences that opened them up to truly learning from the Other. For some, this happened in abrupt, specific incidences that permanently transformed them – for others, this was a gradual move throughout their lives.

2. Embodying or Living out One's Faith

All of these women easily connect their interfaith work to their particular faith traditions and values. All of them refer to their interfaith work as putting theory and theology into practice: by living out their faith and values – by being good Jews, good Christians, good Muslims, good Baha'is – they are carried beyond their faith communities and into relationship with the religious Other. This connection of faith to action is not only a big motivator for these women, but also a sustaining resource for their continued interfaith work. Not only do their faiths direct them to this work, but their continual development within their faith traditions inspires their developing interfaith work. Ann and Karen, for example, quickly adopted the interfaith cause as their own after initially being brought into the interfaith community by their own religious leaders.

3. Desire for Community that Shares One's Values

All of the women stated that they highly valued developing a secondary “interfaith” community outside of their own faith community. Several alluded to how much they appreciated being around others who share their values for peace, tolerance, and interfaith understanding. They all stated that the

relationships they were able to build with people, as part of this new community, were very important to them. Interfaith work connects these women to those in the interfaith community who, despite having different faith traditions, have similar visions for society, and therefore serve as a source of support and encouragement.

4. Desire to Contribute to the Larger Community

All of the women stated a desire to impact others and contribute something to the world or their larger community. For Rivkah and Hadya, both religious and ethnic minorities, their first steps into the interfaith arena were a direct result of a need to have their own communities and voices respected by Others. By stepping out to build relationships with those around them and have their perspectives represented or heard, these women were trying to impact Others and create communities that embodied their interfaith values. Rivkah stated that she sees a direct correlation between her desire to do interfaith work and her desire to create a community in which her value for safety and protection is embodied. Ann spoke repeatedly about wanting to help people deconstruct their stereotypes and barriers. Karen strives to build empathic, unifying relationships with people and to help others have the same experiences that have been so meaningful to her.

B. Personal Impacts of Interfaith Agency

1. Learning about Oneself

All four women have described profound shifts in their understanding of themselves as a result of their interfaith work. All of them have explored new roles, learned about their strengths and weaknesses, discovered passions, grown spiritually and intellectually, and had the opportunity to live out and continually develop their values and visions for the world. All of the women are either currently serving or have recently served on the governing board of an interfaith nonprofit organization.

An outsider would call them leaders, yet only Rivkah clearly and without hesitation described herself as a leader and as someone who loves taking on leadership roles in groups. The others, despite their reticence to call themselves leaders, have started embracing their leadership capacity.

2. Maturing in One's Own Faith and Relationship to One's Faith Community

Just as their faiths drive them to do interfaith work, these women describe a maturing within their faiths as they do interfaith work. Ann described a growing vision of God's love and care. Hadya said that she has become a better Muslim through her interfaith work. Karen now sees more clearly that her faith requires her to be involved in interfaith work, and that she is growing into a stronger Baha'i. Rivkah said that she has learned more to distinguish between her Jewish principles and the teachings of other faiths. Though they grew deeper into their own traditions, Ann and Hadya did not always feel supported by their traditions' communities to do interfaith work. Rivkah talked about her desire for more people from her community to participate in the interfaith work that she does. Karen was the only person who described receiving much practical and moral support from her community of faith.

3. Expanding Circles of Community

For all of the participants, their increased understanding of other faiths has helped them to increase their sense of community. This has different meanings for each woman. In her interactions with religious Others, each woman has learned more about herself, her convictions, and how those relate to the lives of other people. Many of them have changed their approaches to and expectations of people of different faiths as a result of interfaith experiences. Hadya learned that there are “Muslims” - people who share a similar worldview or spirituality as her – in all faiths. This is a point of interest, as one of her biggest sources of suffering is the dehumanizing and stereotyping of Muslims. Just as she

hates not belonging in general, it would seem she is learning to include more and more people in her own circles. Ann, someone else also very concerned with inclusion and exclusion, also had a similar experience of growing her circles of connection and compassion to encompass increasingly larger numbers of people and to deconstruct stereotypes of Others. Rivkah described learning to see the universality of some of the issues that are closest to her, like the conflict in Israel, as well as learning to deconstruct her own stereotypes. Karen's universalist beliefs have been given practical grounding through her interfaith work.

C. Visions for the Future

1. Continued Personal Growth

All of the participants spoke about a desire to continue growing as people. After reflecting on all the areas in which they have been impacted, they have a real appreciation for the ways in which interfaith work has impacted their characters and spirits. Rivkah plans to continue to stretch her understanding of her own identity around conflict in Israel by bringing Muslims into the conversation groups that used to include only Christians and Jews. Ann says that now that she has started stretching her wings out, she wants to keep them out and not fold back in. She wants to continue to grow her circles of compassion and understanding of God. Hadya wants to continue polishing her “disco ball” and working to be a better Muslim. Karen plans to seek training to become the responsible and effective leader that she wants to be.

2. Continuing to Develop Interfaith Agency

Each participant's past experiences and insights have helped her develop ideas about expanding their work as individuals and the work of their organizations. Rivkah wants to bring human rights and anti-discrimination work into her groups. Ann has a larger sense of responsibility for bringing her

values and experiences to others, and is looking forward to developing interfaith programs in her new church and community. Similarly, Karen wants to take the experiences and growth she has had in Columbus into her new community. She is already planning to meet with particular leaders and start cultivating relationships in order to organize an interfaith group in her new community. Hadya wants to focus on creating interfaith leadership programs for young women as the key to developing a more peaceful and loving world.

3. What is Needed in the World and How to Get There

Each of the four women spoke about her visions for their community and world, and connected their interfaith work to the fulfillment of that vision. These visions are connected to where these women have come from, their reasons for doing interfaith work, and how they've been changed by their agency. Rivkah's vision is for a community that accepts its members and provides a safe space for them. Ann sees a path in which women unite across religious and other differences in order to make the world safer and more compassionate for their children and grandchildren. Hadya described an analogy of a tender blade of grass pushing itself patiently up through the hard soil, and the beauty of each of the five different fingers on her hand. Karen described a world in which people come together across their differences and realize their interconnectedness. All four women are using these visions to guide their plans for future work.

IV. Conclusions

A. Women's Reflections on Interfaith Agency: Lessons for the Rest of Us

At the beginning of this study, the case was made that it is both appropriate and important to shine a light on women's perspectives and stories about their interfaith work. Women's stories provide a key part of understanding why people are doing this work, how they approach it, what they

contribute, how they've been impacted by it, and where their lessons and transformations are taking them. These are important messages for those who are interested in social change work, particularly work to build bridges across religious difference. This study collected and analyzed four women's reflections on their interfaith work, their contributions and potential contributions to the larger movement, and the internal processes of change that they have experienced as a result of their agency. These are stories of individual transformations and visions as much as they are stories of interfaith community-building; in fact, the individual and community aspects seem to have a dialectical relationship and to mutually impact each other.

These four particular women generously provided glimpses into their worlds as interfaith agents. All of their stories were unique, and each one held its own quality of power and meaning. Through the interviews, we can see pieces of how these women perceive not only themselves, but also their understanding of faith, their agency, the meaning of community, the contributions they hope to make to their communities, and the visions they have for our world. Such leadership and wisdom could be used as a resource for mending a broken, divisive world, were it to be welcomed by their colleagues in the interfaith movement. These women's lessons and actions are contributing to a body of collective experiences and responses to our increasingly diverse nation. Their reflections, with their areas of convergence and divergence, add to a holistic picture of what is happening today at the grassroots level among those who are working to improve communication and understanding among the many faiths in our society.

What hope can we draw for our society and its many communities in light of these women's choices, perspectives, and achievements? These women's choices, perspectives, and achievements offer many lessons for all of us in the interfaith movement. First, their willingness to reflect on their personal stories invites all of us to similar reflections: How can their visions and words impact the

larger interfaith movement and interfaith workers outside of Columbus, Ohio? How do each of us understand and articulate our own vision for our world? How do we dig into our own spiritual and philosophical traditions for strength and guidance in order to do the work we know needs to be done? How do we deal with difference in our lives – do we approach it as a source for violence, generalization, and separation, or a source for healing and growth? Where are each of us at in our own development of personal agency?

In addition, these stories show us there is no single path to leadership in interfaith work. Some actors begin with a sense of leadership, such as Rivkah. In fact, Rivkah's experience in leadership positions was one of the *reasons* that Rivkah began her interfaith work – and it shaped the roles that she took on immediately. On the other hand, there are those for whom the concept of leadership or agency seems very far removed – something that others do or have. And yet, as Ann, Karen, and Hadya demonstrate, one does not have to begin as a leader in order to contribute to and inspire the kind of community one envisions. For them, leadership has emerged as *a result of* their interfaith work, and will continue to shape the roles they take in the future. Their developing leadership abilities and roles have encouraged them to continue doing innovative interfaith work, and will - no doubt - inform their future agency.

Lastly, there are several dialectical processes happening in these women's lives that can be instructive to others. It seems that as they strengthen in their own faith traditions, they find even more resources for deepening their interfaith work; likewise, as their interfaith work deepens, they develop deeper ways of relating to their own faith traditions. They also have a dialectical relationship between the personal and the universal. Their personal experiences – of relationship, of faith, of expansion – lead them to hopes and visions about the whole of humanity and the potential for change in the world. Pursuing those unique visions also impacts them deeply on a personal level - and so the cycle of agency

continues.

B. Literature and Analysis

What do these women's stories suggest about the assertions of scholars such as Abu-Nimer, Eck and Patel? Patel's idea of the super-ordinate interfaith identity that parallels people's personal religious identities is demonstrated in several descriptions. Each of the women confirms that she has a sense of an interfaith community in addition to her own faith community. This research adds nuance to Patel's dual-identity notion by suggesting that the two identities seem to be in a mutually-informing relationship with each other. Rivkah acts out of her faith identity by recognizing the connection between the plight of her people and the plights of other groups. Ann is a Christian, but has an interfaith heart that defines her Christianity. Hadya is a Muslim, but now recognizes Muslims in people of all faiths. Karen is Baha'i, but now recognizes that Baha'i is not a separate religion, but rather a unifier of religions.

The four women definitely live out Eck's description of pluralism as being an intentional way of appreciating and searching for relationship with the religious Other – that much is obvious by their interfaith work. But their descriptions here provide more depth to the question of pluralism – what does it really *mean* to an individual to cross such personal and collective boundaries? What does it mean for people to be open to not only building a relationship with a person of another faith, but valuing that person enough to be open to learning from them?

Another scholarly position demonstrated by these women's stories is Abu-Nimer's assertion that interfaith work is a particularly powerful form of intergroup work is demonstrated by these women's stories. The stories of personal change in areas such as character, spiritual growth, understanding of themselves and others, and hopes for the world, point to the particularly profound potential for

interfaith work to fundamentally change the way communities are formed and handle differences. As more and more people join the interfaith movement, this capacity for change increases significantly. Certainly not everyone who devotes time to the interfaith movement is acting out of the same principles or working toward the same goals. However, the visions of the leaders of the interfaith community create a composite picture of where the movement is headed, and how it might get there. Understanding how these women see themselves – their particular gifts, yearnings, and offerings – provides a picture of the potential continuing transformation of themselves, and by extensions, ourselves and the world around us, including other people who may one day become involved in interfaith work.

C. Areas for Further Study

This study raises many valuable questions about religious identity and community. It would be worthwhile to pursue the development of a religious identity model that could encompass the experiences these women describe of crossing boundaries and learning to define their own faith through the lens of their interfaith work. This proposal would have implications for the peacebuilding, conflict transformation, and social justice fields, in that it would exemplify the phenomenon of dual identities: a personal identity as well as a meta-identity that encompasses “Others.” Perhaps this is a phenomenon that could be observed in other arenas of social action as well. Another area for further study, one that I did not have the capacity to devote time to within the framework of this study, is the issue of religious majority and minority groups, and how that affects agents' motivations, impacts and visions. Also, it seems very useful to explore these women's visions and learnings as contributions to the development of more humanizing theologies and ways of embodying faith in community.

D. Final Thoughts

Eck asks us, “What kind of America do we want?” (2001, p. 339). These women ask us to broaden and focus our view of this question by addressing simultaneously these related questions: What kind of personal community do we want to build, together with our own neighbors? What kind of larger world do we want? Furthermore, how do we move from holding these answers in our heads to action on the ground? Truly acting on our individual answer to these questions – taking these questions “not as someone else's but as our own” (Eck, 2001, p. 339) - is at the heart of agency. Each woman who participated in this project has provided us with a glimpse into how she has sought out and acted upon her own answers to these questions. These four women are just a few of the many individuals working among our communities to change our society and provide new visions for building bridges between otherwise separate groups. As Eck says, “the men and women who provide the energy for the interfaith movement are the dreamers and visionaries of a multireligious society” (2001, p. 375). My own prayer is that those interested in a peaceful and compassionate future that values and includes all forms of spiritual practice and religious tradition will find inspiration and wisdom in these women's stories, and encouragement for the journey ahead.

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Appendix A: First Interview Questions

Sub-Question: What are the factors that contribute to women's motivations for participating in interfaith work and taking on their chosen roles?

Background:

1. What is your name, age, and faith/religious, educational, and career background?

Concrete Experience:

2. What current/recent interfaith projects are you involved with?

Reflection:

3. How and why did you become involved in interfaith work?

4. What different roles have you taken on in your interfaith work?

5. How and why have you chosen those roles?

Abstractions/Identity/Larger Picture:

6. What encourages or supports you to continue participating in interfaith work?

7. What aspects of your interfaith work do you think are most important?

8. What value or contribution do you see in the interfaith work you do?

9. How has being a (Muslim, Jewish) woman has affected your reasons for doing interfaith work?

10. What are your hopes for yourself, your faith, your community, the world related to your interfaith work?

Appendix B: Second Interview Questions

Sub-Question: How are women impacted by their interfaith work?

Concrete Experience:

1. Please describe an interfaith experience that had a big impact on you.

Reflection:

2. What have been your most meaningful interfaith experiences, and why?
3. What have been the most meaningful roles you have had in your interfaith work, and why?

Abstractions/Identity/Larger Picture

4. How has your interfaith work impacted you as a member of your community?
5. How has your interfaith work impacted you personally?
6. How has your interfaith work impacted you as a woman of faith?
7. What lessons have you drawn about yourself, your faith, other people, your community?
8. How has being a (Muslim, Jewish) woman affected your experience of interfaith work?
9. In light of your experiences, how do you envision your future interfaith work?