



The Faith Line: On Building the Cathedrals of Pluralism
Commencement Address at Augsburg College
By Eboo Patel
May 5, 2007

There is a line in the late work of the recently departed American writer Susan Sontag, "Whatever is happening, something else is always going on."

Reading that made me think of a woman I met at an interfaith conference in Australia a few months back, Gill Hicks. "She uses a cane," I remember thinking to myself when she walked into the room. "Strange for a woman so young".

I forgot about that as we got into a discussion of interfaith relations in Britain and America. I was struck by the depth of her knowledge of the Muslim community, the extent of her relationships. She spent her days meeting with Muslim leaders, and her evenings organizing programs that brought people from different ethnic groups together to build bridges.

"What's your professional background?" I asked. "Were you trained in this?"

She laughed and said, "I'm an interior designer".

"So how did you come to do this work?" I prodded.

"I was on the London Tube on July 7. I lost my legs on the Piccadilly line."

I opened and closed my mouth a few times and finally stammered out, "What do you think of when you think of it now?"

"The same thing I thought of then," she said. "How good human beings can be."

I stared at her in disbelief.

"As I was almost bleeding to death, there were people making their way down into the tunnel, risking their lives to save me.

I heard voices around me and felt someone touching my shoulder and shouting, "Priority One."

"I awoke in the hospital with a wristband inscribed with words, 'One Unknown'. My medical intake sheet read, 'Estimated Female'. And I realized that the people who saved me had no idea who I was. They were from all different backgrounds themselves, and it didn't matter if I was richer or poorer than them, lighter or darker, if I prayed in the same way or a different way or not at all."

Listening to her, I thought back to my own reaction to the London Tube bombing, how angry I was – how angry the whole world was. I remember the

newspaper headlines of how we were all becoming more suspicious of each other, how that was a natural reaction. I remember the calls to arms, the clouds of hanging over groups that happened to share an ethnicity or religion with those four terrorists.

Who knew that there was another set of eyes on the matter? Who knew that Gill Hicks was lying in her hospital bed arguing with her fiancé about the menu for their wedding, determined to get married on the day that they had planned, resolved that this incident would only inspire her to learn more about other people, only commit her further to building bridges, to shining light, to loving fully. Who knew that one of the people who lay bleeding deep in the tunnel thought mostly of the strangers who were rescuing her rather than the strangers who had harmed her?

“Whatever is happening, something else is always going on.”

In his new book, Peace Be Upon You, Zachary Karabell writes: “If we emphasize hate, scorn, war, and conquest, we are unlikely to perceive that any other path is viable ...”

Hate, scorn, war and conquest sounds like a pretty good summary of our newscasts; it certainly seems like the dominant narrative of our times. And the soundtrack of violence these days appears to be prayer – in Arabic, in Hebrew, in Hindi, in various inflections of English.

There are many who are eager to divide humanity along a faith line: Sunnis vs Shias; Catholics vs Protestants; Hindus vs Buddhists.

I believe there is something else going on. I believe that the faith line is indeed the challenge of our century, but it does not divide people of different religious backgrounds. The faith line does not separate Muslims and Christians or Hindus and Jews. The faith line separates religious totalitarians and religious pluralists.

A religious totalitarian is someone who seeks to suffocate those who are different. Their weapons range from suicide bombs to media empires. There are Christian totalitarians and Hindu totalitarians and Jewish totalitarians and Muslim totalitarians. They are on the same side of the faith line: arm in arm against the dream of a common life together.

A pluralist is someone who seeks to live with people who are different, be enriched by them, help them thrive. Pluralists resonate with the Qur’ annic line: “God made us different nations and tribes that we may come to know one another.” Pluralists are moved by the image of the Reverend Martin Luther King Jr. marching together with the Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel in Selma. Pluralists love the words of the poet Gwendolyn Brooks:

*We are each other's business
We are each other's harvest
We are each other's magnitude and bond*

Near the beginning of A People’s History of the United States, Howard Zinn hopes out loud that “our future may be found in the past's fugitive moments of compassion rather than in its solid centuries of warfare.”

So many eyes went to the smoldering ruins of those subway trains on July 7 and saw only destruction, perceived only a victory for the totalitarians, imagined only the narrow inevitability of continuing violence.

But one woman was looking in a different direction. Her eyes went to the subway workers who rescued her, the nurses and doctors who restored her, the family and fiancé who never left her side. This was what it meant to be human.

Like Jane Addams, she began to imagine a "cathedral" for this humanity – a place where people from different backgrounds lived together in mutual trust and loyalty. And she left her career to follow that calling, to make the cathedral in her imagination a reality on earth - stone by stone, meeting by meeting, program by program.

We pluralists far outnumber the totalitarians. What if we let ourselves imagine? What if we began building? What if every city block were a cathedral of pluralism; every university campus; every summer camp and day care. There would not be enough bombs in the world to destroy all of our cathedrals.

I believe each one of us is born with that cathedral inscribed in our soul. Our imaginations know its architecture intimately. Our hands recognize the cut of each stone. As J.M. Coetzee says, "All creatures come into the world bringing with them the memory of justice." We Muslims call it being born in a state of fitrah, naturally inclining towards that which is good, because God gave us the gift of his ruh, of his breath.

It is from breath that we get life, and from breath that we get song, and the most beautiful thing we do in cathedrals is sing.

Earth is not always an easy place to imagine cathedrals, or to build them, or to fill them with song. There are times when you will feel like there is a conspiracy against your clarity; like the loneliness is freezing and the darkness is deep and the silence is unbreakable. Go back to your breath. Know its source. Know its purpose. Know that sometimes the order is upside down – that instead of going from imagination to building to song, you have to begin by singing.

And as you get accustomed to the sound of your own voice, you may discover that it is not alone. You may discover that a group of strangers has gathered, and they are humming, harmonizing, taking your lead, singing along. You may realize that the darkness has been broken by a soft glow. You may wonder where exactly you are. You may look around and see stained glass, you may look up and find yourself staring into the forever spire of a majestic cathedral.

And then you will know the truth of the words of the poet Li-Young Lee:
"You must sing to be found; when found, you must sing."

<http://www.augsburg.edu/commencement/patel.pdf>