

**Pillars of Dialogue: Compassion, Tolerance, Love & Forgiveness**  
**Unitarian Universalist Community of the Mountains 11/23/08**  
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The trip began at 5:30 am as I loaded my wheeled backpack into the car to be deposited with me at the Auburn Amtrak station. A car ride, a train ride, a van ride, and two plane rides later I landed in Istanbul, Turkey with 13 traveling companions. We were travel weary, excited and curious about our mission – a hosted cultural exchange for the purpose of interfaith dialogue with members of the moderate Islamic G7len Movement. Our hours of traveling were marked for most of us by diligent study of two professional journals we had been asked to read in preparation for our mission: *The Muslim World, A Journal Devoted to the Study of Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations*; and *Muslim Citizens of the Globalized World – Contributions of the G7len Movement*.

We had so many questions. Why had our hosts chosen to treat us to ten days in their land? To feed us, transport us, bring us into their homes, their schools, their institutions, their sacred and historical sites. What did they want from us in return? What was the G7len Movement and who was Fetullah G7len? And what, after all, is Islam?

As we loaded onto our minibus at the Istanbul airport I asked Yavuz, a doctoral student at UCD who made every part of our trip smooth and meaningful, what he needed from us to make the trip successful in his mind. He replied that we only needed to enter into dialogue with the families and business people that we were introduced to; to ask everything that was on our minds without censure.

This answer, here in this ancient land, so full of mystery to our Western eyes added even more mystery. Could it be true that Americans who were bombarded daily with reports of suicide bombings and terrorists attacks attributed to Muslims were welcome to ask every question?

The first question, of course, was about Fetullah G7len and the movement he has inspired. Now in his 60's G7len was born into an Anatolian village family that raised him with a pervasive spiritual perspective on life. His mother taught the Qur'an to him and all the village women, at a time when even reciting the Qur'an was prosecuted. It is said that the rural environment of his childhood may have facilitated the life of prayer and meditation that marks his adulthood. G7len himself remembers the silence and calm that dominated his village with these words.

The morning sunlight, the mewing of sheep and lambs, the cries of insects and birds would strike our hearts in sweet waves of pleasure and add their voices to nature's deep, inner chorus...

In this world – the next-door neighbor to the next world – the call to prayer and the prayer litanies, the language of the beyond world, call us to a different concert and take us around in a deeper and more spiritual atmosphere.

He memorized the Qur'an at a young age and says that he began praying when he was 4 years old, and has never missed a prayer since. He dedicated himself early on to a simple lifestyle, choosing an ascetic's path devoted to prayer and religious pursuits. He owns virtually no possessions. His ubiquitous writings cover a wide range of spiritual topics.

Gülen's work in Turkey is notable in that it is highly religious within a secularized national context, as well as apolitical within a highly politicized environment. In this national context – as well as an international environment in which Islamic and other religious rhetoric took on the character of diatribe and ideological denunciations of others as infidels and traitors – Gülen managed to move back and forth between the religious and secular, between the Islamic and the non-Islamic, promoting his Sufi-inspired emphasis on love of humanity and the compatibility of Islam with modernity, democracy and progress.

His work has inspired a multi-national movement with millions of followers, hundreds of schools in Turkey and beyond, centers dedicated to intercultural dialogue, major international print and broadcast media, and more. This year *Foreign Policy* magazine named Fetullah Gülen as the public intellectual of the year. How can it be that we do not know this man?

The words of Saint Francis typify what we experienced: "Teach everyone. When necessary use words." The movement teaches in the classroom of daily life. They do not tell us how to live, they show us how they live. They give us a chance to look past our differences and seek deep understanding through dialogue and a celebration of the many ways we are the same. They share their homes, bring us into their schools – the children crowd two to a desk so we can sit with them and trade simple questions in English. I see the men greet each other with deep warmth and affection. I sense that they know that those in the movement will allow them to be vulnerable, to be real, to expose their hearts. I see children being treated with respect and dignity and see it being returned in the respect they show their elders and guests. I experience an eagerness to engage in real dialogue, exploring our differences, celebrating the places that we meet.

If there is any hope for the world it will come from the triumph of compassion and tolerance over fear and greed. It is not enough to look outside ourselves for this. It must begin in our own hearts. For me, the inspiration of this trip was seeing that triumph in the lives of person after person, and in seeing the strength of individuals joined together to create institutions which broadly communicate the richness and attainability of lives lived without fear and greed. It is a model for our own lives and for our own UU community.

I find myself wondering why fear is so woven into the fabric of our lives even here. In Nevada County we know our neighbors, have open space, and a more peaceful pace of life, and yet our children are far too often hurried in behind locked doors. We find it easier to believe in scarcity than abundance. And since we are so quick to judge we have family members and friends who fear being authentic with each other for fear of ridicule and rejection. We so fear “the other” among us that we avoid the honest exploration of ideas that reveal our commonalities and increase our closeness.

Dialogue, the tool that is at the heart of the G7len Movement, is a lost art in our culture. Even in a community like ours at UUCM we all too often deal with conflict by going into silence or verbal violence rather than using the powerful tools of dialogue.

Dialogue, called by writer William Issacs “the art of thinking together” is an ancient tool. No indigenous culture has yet been found that does not have the practice of sitting in a circle and talking. Whether it be council circles, or women’s circles, or circles of elders, it seems to be one of the truly universal practices among humankind. As expressed in Native American cultures, “You talk and talk until the talk starts.

It was only a few generations ago that, as people grew older, they did so with the idea that personal maturation had a lot to do with developing one’s abilities in “the art of conversation”. It was a time when, with the day’s work done, people sat and talked. It was a time when the oral tradition was still alive, and the telling of stories had not yet passed from day-to-day living. It was also a time when life and relationships still revolved around making meaningful and simple conversation with one another.

Although this was a fairly recent time, it seems very distant to us today. Thinker and management guru Peter Senge says:

“In a sense we are running an historic experiment today. We are experimenting with whether or not a society can hold itself together without the core process that has always bound societies, the process of conversation.”

G7len tells us that dialogue, “interfaith dialogue, [specifically], is a must today, and the first step in establishing it is forgetting the past, ignoring polemical arguments, and giving precedent to common points, which far outnumber the polemical ones.”

What is this ancient art of dialogue? We were invited to Turkey to experience it with people portrayed as far different from us. Must we travel so far, or is it something that those of us in the room can cultivate? Can it be the key to us, right here, achieving the richness of connection and deep satisfaction in our lives that I saw lived out in Turkey? Can we embrace it in our community culture so that we can move past inartful behavior and look for unmet needs to reestablish wounded and broken relationships?

When I was first exposed to this ancient technology of dialogue I was told that it required me to suspend my assumptions and noble certainties by holding them up for examination. I ponder that term: *noble certainties*. Do I have them? How do I recognize them? One hint is when I notice myself judging a person or idea ... I judge: "He is good", or "that's a dumb idea," "She's way off base," or "that's a great plan." Whether we judge someone or something as good or bad, we are still judging them. Our judgments are based on our noble certainties. In order to enter dialogue we must suspend judgment.

What noble certainties do you have? Since returning from Turkey I have been amazed how many intelligent, thinking people have told me that Islam promotes violence, that it is not safe to travel in Turkey, or that the god of Islam is certainly not the same god of the Christians and Jews. They are very certain, and yet they are wrong. While radical extremism exists in a small minority of those who profess to be Muslim it is not the teaching of Islam.

The Qur'an teaches "Make it easy, do not make it difficult. Make it beloved and give good news. Do not make it hated. All mankind, we have created you from male and female and have made you nations and tribes that you may know each other.

Judgment is deeply woven into our lives. How often do we watch as friends and neighbors condemn each other for behaviors they stand in judgment about bad, without taking time understand and explore what needs the behaviors communicate.

How often do we enter an encounter with "the other" .. politically other, religiously other, competitively other, offensively other, generationally other, lifestyle other, certain of our point of view. And how often are they equally certain of theirs?

In dialogue a magical thing happens. Participants exchange certainty for curiosity. They listen with eagerness and without judgment to hear another perspective, knowing it will enrich their own thinking. They listen and talk reflectively and respectfully. They speak when they are truly moved. They listen in the silence for the shared flow of meaning. Quantum physicist and philosopher David Bohm describes dialogue as "a stream of meaning flowing among and through and between us:... out of which will emerge some **new understanding**."

I was fortunate to spend last Sunday with William Issacs, author of *Dialogue and The Art of Thinking Together*. His latest thinking goes more deeply into the subject as he explores the thresholds we must pass over to achieve the deep connections we long for, and the creative solutions we need to keep pace with the evolution of the planet. Without overt words to say so, his work is deeply spiritual. I could not help reflect on our experience with our Turkish friends as I listened to his wisdom.

He reminded us that listening is the key. Listening requires attention and requires silence. We tend to listen to ourselves, not others, paying attention to our own thoughts of how we judge

what we are hearing, or what we will say next. You might try paying close attention to your mind the next time you get in a conversation. Are you listening to them or to you? Do you inquire deeply to fully understand their needs and how they see the world, or jump in at the first chance to express your point?

Dialogue opens up broad new worlds of possibility beyond that which we can conjure up in our individual minds. It requires the courage to be honest, and it requires the humility to recognize that we just don't see things as they are, our mental models create a filtered lens through which we see only a part of what's happening.

Dialogue helps us remember who we are. There was a sense of authenticity in our Turkish acquaintances that we do not often see here. Far too often, in our media over-laden culture our identity lodges somewhere it doesn't belong. It lodges on the surface of us, in our bodies and belongings, or our minds and titles.

Bill Issacs suggests that our true identity is in our character or soul. There is no mistaking someone whose identity is grounded in strength of character. We have our share of them in this our UU community. When you meet such a person you feel a sense of safety and authenticity. Are you one of those people? To rise out of false identity, Issacs says we must express the highest level of character that you can muster in every case.

This brings us full circle to the wisdom of Fetullah G̃len. His teaching, as with all of the great sages, is simple: Compassion and tolerance, love and forgiveness are the pillars that enable us to enter into dialogue with ourselves and others. Grounded in a character-led life we can experience our own divinity as we move, as Mr. G̃len says: "So deep in his or her own inner world, so full of love... so much in touch with God; but at the same time an active member of society."

Now is the time for each of us to examine our own hearts and our own behavior. We are at a new point in history, a seminal time on the planet. It is time to re-embrace a culture of dialogue so that we too may experience the triumph of love, compassion, tolerance and forgiveness over fear and greed.

May it be so.