

The path to oneness along the road to peace

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The Ashland Culture of Peace Commission (ACPC) recently hosted a group of locals with diverse religious affiliations to examine how our community's organized religions have helped pave the way to peace.

Compassion, an essential component of a culture of peace, is a value that most faiths share. Inclusivity, a strong intention of a culture of peace, has evolved over time through patient tenacity in local faith communities.

The group recognized that along the path toward oneness, there's been a lot of painful exclusion. Our collective memories offered examples of the suffering of gays who couldn't be church members, women who couldn't be clergy, committed partners who couldn't get married.

What triggered the changes that resulted in local worship communities becoming more affirming, open, and welcoming? According to the late Lutheran theologian Paul Tillich, dedication to one tradition and knowing its roots brings us in touch with all other traditions, a veritable pathway to becoming more inclusive.

Highlighting various traditions of the world and exploring in depth how they convey inner, community, and world peace has helped Unity in Ashland find interconnectedness and create inclusivity.

One of our local rabbis warmly welcomes the non-Jew and non-believer who show up for special events at his synagogue, and he provides public meditation sessions and ancient Jewish ethics studies for the community at large.

For the Quakers, who seek unity in decision-making, the movement toward inclusivity was slow and gradual, paralleling society's attitudinal shifts of the 1990s. Within the same decade, the Unitarians, who honor the dignity of every human being, took classes to become a welcoming congregation.

The symbol of the Unitarian Universalism stands for the light of reason, the flame of hope, the warmth of community. In a monthly Unitarian activity known as “Soul Matters,” participants ponder theme-linked questions, then one by one respond in turn, being listened to without interruption — a dialogue process aligned with a culture of peace.

The Methodists decided to become a reconciling congregation after experiencing within their faith community the perseverance of a gay son’s loving parents and the tragic death of a Southern Oregon lesbian couple. Becoming reconciling is a commitment to not only accept but also encourage LGBTQ parishioners to walk through the church’s open doors and into the congregation’s open hearts.

Tillich has said that “there is no love that doesn’t become help.”

Various religious fellowships practice compassion through studying non-violent communication, providing food and shelter for people without homes, and/or marching in the SO Pride parade. Compassion in action manifests as outreach to elementary schools, stuffing daypacks with food so that kids, some from families residing in vehicles, won’t go hungry over the weekend.

Even as such anecdotes reflect movement toward greater inclusivity, the discussion group participants vocalized their own varied experiences of “belonging” in today’s Ashland that they all love. What, the group pondered, would open our community’s heart to greater inclusivity across such divides as race, ethnicity, economic status, and geographic origin?

Our group concluded that the Ashland community would benefit from setting the intention and taking the initiative to create structures which would foster greater inclusivity. Neighborhood gatherings, such as block parties and “art in the alley,” offer opportunities to socialize beyond our everyday cliques, perhaps easing us out of our comfort zones just enough to open our hearts to strangers.

Suggestions arose for ways to rethink the Ashland community as one large neighborhood to call upon. Faith groups could invite each other to “circle-of-eight” dinners, as could service clubs. Long-time residents could become more involved in newcomers’ welcome groups. One faith community enriches its holiday potluck dinner by each person’s inviting a homeless guest to the table.

Studying together to acquire the skills for communicating more compassionately and openly was a path that created more inclusive spiritual communities. Individuals could increase their circles of acquaintances by joining classes offered through Osher Lifelong Learning Institute (OLLI), Ashland Parks and Recreation, the public library, and nonviolent communication practitioners. Diverse-topic talking circles take place regularly at the Ashland Culture of Peace Commission.

May our community design ways to reshape our social culture so as to reinforce reaching out across the many divides. A more universal sense of compassion and belonging, even if it requires patient tenacity, would clear debris on the road to peace.

Discussion participants included Lois Pettinger, Sharon Harris, Norma Burton, Jerry Kenefick, and Daniel Murphy. Bob Morse is an ambassador for the Ashland Culture of Peace Commission. Email comments and questions to ashlandcpc@gmail.com, or drop by the commission office at 33 1st St., Suite 1. The ACPC website is www.ashlandcpc.org; like the commission on Facebook at www.facebook.com/AshlandCultureofPeaceCommission; follow twitter.com/AshlandPeace on Twitter.



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