

Daughters of Abraham: An interfaith journey

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It is an honor and a pleasure to be with you tonight. Thank you for this invitation to speak about the Daughters of Abraham, a network of interfaith women's book groups, and a group so close to my heart. I grew up in Rochester, New York before there was much emphasis on interfaith conversations. The fact that I am standing here in Boston at an Iftar dinner among Jewish, Muslim and Christian colleagues is amazing! I have ended up on an exciting journey, both unpredictable and delightful! One I could never have imagined!

Let's start with the journey. My family's social network was Irish-Catholic, a very defined sub-set! Even our in-laws were Irish!. Growing up, I did have Protestant friends, but you could quite literally count them on your fingers, as long as you used both hands! And, I had some Jewish friends. But not many. My father was in politics so we knew a lot of people but it was a narrow swath religiously. And, as far as I know I never met a Muslim, or a

Buddhist or a Hindu. So, clearly, I come from a very different world from the interfaith world I live in today!

I loved religion from the time I was a child. I wanted to learn more about other religions. I took courses and read books and found people to interview and tried to absorb as much information as I could. Looking back, I think I was a little obnoxious! Religious thought became the focus of my academic life. I taught World Religions for over 40 years in various settings among a variety of people.

Along the way, I joined interfaith groups in cities where I did my ministry- places like Somerville and Braintree and Lowell. I have participated in numerous discussions on religion and planned interfaith services for Thanksgiving and other civic events. And, that in itself would have been enough. A rich and rewarding life right there.

But then September 11, 2001 burst upon us. And the world changed. Certainly it changed dramatically here in America. Many of us struggled to respond to the events of that day. This is where our Daughters of Abraham journey begins. Our founder, Edith Howe, who died two years ago, went to an interfaith service the night of September 11, 2001 at First Church in

Cambridge where she was a member. She sat among Jewish and Muslim women and wondered, as many of us did that night: “What can I do? How can I respond to what happened today?” And then she thought, “I could start a book group. Women go to book groups.” And so the Daughters of Abraham was birthed the night of September 11. It took another year of discussions and planning sessions with Muslims, Christians and Jews until we began in 2002.

That initial group, with some additions and departures, has been meeting continuously ever since. We meet monthly for two hours. We begin each meeting by sharing kosher and halal food which members have brought. The Christians, most of whom are omnivores, have learned a lot about kosher and halal food. One of the Christian women who was supposed to bring the snacks for a meeting called me from the supermarket to ask how she could tell if the apple juice she wanted to buy was kosher. Another time two Muslim women had offered to bring food for our Daughters’ meeting. They knew to look for kosher and halal food. What they didn’t know, however, until they got to Whole Foods, was that it was Passover so they needed to find food that was kosher for Passover. They were delighted with

themselves, when after some serious shopping and lots of advice and consultation from the store employees, they found just the right food for our meeting! Sometimes we coordinate the food to go with the book- Turkish food for a Turkish book, Iranian delicacies for a book on Iran! And, in the process we have learned about dietary laws, about fasting and feasting, about how the simple act of eating is imbued with religious meaning. How eating or not eating is about being faithful to God.

Then at our meeting, after we have talked informally together and shared food we gather to talk about a book we have chosen which deals with our religious tradition. Our mission as Daughters of Abraham is to read books together to learn about one another and to build mutual respect and understanding. Reading books serves several purposes. One, it provides a common basis for our discussion and puts everyone on a level playing field. You can have a Ph.D. in religion or an interest in religion but not a lot of background and since we have all read the same book we all have something to say. And it provides some safety in the group. Instead of saying: "Why do Christians believe such and such?" You can say, "I was curious why Susan said what she did on page 13. Can you help me understand that?" The book

means that you are one step removed and can speak comfortably in the group.

If you go to our web site (www.daughtersofabraham.com) you'll see how many books we have read over these years. And, that's not the whole list! Books about strong women and men in our history, about life cycle events and prayer and worship and religious leadership- rabbis and imams and priests and ministers- and lots of books about monks and nuns! Books which have taken us all over the world- Poland, Egypt, Turkey, China, Morocco, and the American West. We read books about immigration, inculturation and forgiveness. We have read novels, memoirs, history, and poetry. We talk about religion and our own experience as a person of faith. We are not a theological dialogue group. Nor are we a political group. Those are good things! But, it is not our mission as Daughters of Abraham.

Sometimes, through our reading, we find that we are able to make surprising connections. Once, when reading a novel about a cloistered Carmelite nun, one of our Muslim members said that the book reminded her of her grandmother, who, after her husband died, devoted herself to prayer and the study of the Quran and didn't go out much. A cloistered nun in

California and a Muslim grandmother in Iran don't immediately seem to be on a similar path, but we discovered that they were!

And, in learning about one another's religion, we have also been on a journey into the heart of our own. For me, one of the most powerful gifts of the Daughters of Abraham movement is to discover more profoundly what distinguishes me as a Christian. What perspective do I have as I look at the world? How is this different from the way my Jewish and Muslim sisters look at the world? Sometimes when we talk about prayer or the sharing of our wealth or social justice we sound very similar indeed. But, when we talk about forgiveness and the person of Jesus we differ, sometimes dramatically!

We have learned what is true about our own religion and that of our sisters. Most of us discovered that we didn't know as much as we thought we did about our own religion and that of our sisters. And, in the process we have been able to correct misconceptions in conversations with friends and family and present an alternative viewpoint. Sometimes welcome and sometimes not! But, we have been able to speak from our own experience about our sisters and the way their religion informs their lives. And we can

speak comfortably about our own religious tradition and reflect on its uniqueness in the light of what we have learned about one another. I had a recent experience of this at church. Some people were talking about the proposed Islamic Center in New York City. There were more misconceptions around about Islam and Muslims than I could have imagined. So I spoke up. Most of the people didn't agree with me and I suspect some of them ended up quite miffed at me but their statements could not go unchallenged and I had concrete experience and information about Islam and Muslims to share with them.

Our book group is not just about learning new information and eliminating misconceptions and stereotypes. Over the years we have also shared one another's rituals- Christians and Muslims at bar and bat mitzvahs and naming ceremonies for baby girls, Jews and Christians at iftar dinners like this one. One autumn when Sukkoth and Ramadan coincided, one of our Jewish sisters joked that she had spent more time that year at iftar dinners than in her own sukkah. And then there are Jewish and Muslim Daughters at Christmas and Epiphany and Easter services. And the list goes on and on. An incredible journey!

Daughters of Abraham is also about building a community. A Muslim Daughter from North Africa had her first child. Most of her family and her husband's family, were in Algeria. They were not here to help. So, a Jewish Daughter cooked halal food for them and brought it to their home. Another time one of the Jewish Daughters and I were standing in line waiting to eat an elaborate iftar dinner. She turned to me and said "You do realize that Daughters of Abraham has changed my life!" And, she meant that quite literally. Where she goes, what she eats, what she hears and how she responds will never be the same again after forming a community with Abraham's daughters.

Those are some of our journeys together. Oh, but there's more! We have taken two trips together to Spain and two more are already filled for 2011 and 2012. In Spain we go together to visit one another's important sites. We walk inside the great mosque at Cordoba, we visit the Sephardic museum in Toledo, we go to the Carmelite monastery of St. Teresa in Avila. We reflect together on the shared life of our three faiths on the Iberian peninsula in the past. We are with Christians at the parade of the Three Kings for Epiphany. We meet with contemporary Muslims at the central

mosque in Madrid and with Jews in the community in Seville to consider what the present and future might hold for all three of our religious communities. How we all might live together, not only peaceably, but also creatively and with courage and imagination.

The Daughters have gone twice to Jerusalem, to that holy city which is so important to all of us. Standing at the Western Wall, going to the Church of the Resurrection, (and trying to make some sense of its architecture and mix of languages and rituals) and then to the Haram esh-Sharif/ the Temple Mount. In 2009 we were all allowed to enter the Dome of the Rock and AlAqsa mosque, something which Christian and Jews have not been able to do since 2000 but because we had Muslim sisters with us and all the appropriate permissions and letters and a Muslim woman who was able to persuade the Israeli security guards and the Muslim guide that we had permission, we were able to enter, observe and pray in these places. We sat one day, all of us Daughters, just outside the walls of the Old City of Jerusalem. We were talking together about King David. A Jewish woman wearing a kippah, two Muslim women in hijab, and several Christians, sitting together carrying on a conversation about someone important to all of

us. And, we literally stopped traffic! Foot traffic, that is! People sauntering by stopped dead in their tracks and stared at us. They didn't exactly open their mouths and point but it was as close as you could get to that! I thought at the time that if all if we had done on our Daughters' journey to Jerusalem was to sit together and speak respectfully to one another about David it would have been enough!

And then there was Turkey! Fourteen of us Daughters of Abraham just returned from a journey to Turkey with the Boston Dialogue Foundation. In retrospect, it seems impossible to have fit anything else into our two weeks. We saw as much as humanly possible, getting up early and going to bed late, laughing and eating and walking and riding and singing and then eating and laughing again! We went to Istanbul. We saw something of our shared history in that crossroads city- so full of life and memory - so intensely living in the present and moving to the future while steeped in the art and architecture of the past, and the experience of a life together. We went to Urfa and Harran and remembered our father, Abraham. It was amazing to stand in that desert heat (and its WAS hot!) and to see in your mind's eye the tents and caravans of Abraham and his family as they set out from

Harran. We went to Konya to the grave of Rumi, where we also were given the gift of observing the prayer of the dervishes, watching the dance which mirrors the rotation of the earth. We trekked all over the country eating with families in their homes, sharing food and conversations at restaurants, meeting with groups at schools and organizations who are working for mutual understanding and respect among people who are trying to bring justice and peace to places most in need of it, who are caring for those in need of help, educating and inspiring a new generation. It was an unforgettable journey together in Turkey. Those of us who were able to go are so grateful for this opportunity and this gift.

And, I am happy to report that the Daughters of Abraham journey continues. From the initial Cambridge group founded in 2002, we now have 12 groups in the Boston area, a number of groups around the country, including 3 in Washington, D.C. and a fourth being planned, one in Philadelphia and a second in the planning stages, Others throughout the country and new ones planned for Baltimore, Seattle, West Chester, PA and Arlington, Texas. And, now with our Montreal group we have gone international! We are also in conversation with a Muslim woman who was

part of our Daughters' trip to Jerusalem. She wants to begin a Daughters' group with her Jewish and Christian colleagues in Jerusalem where she lives.

Last year I was in Hebron at the Tomb of the Patriarchs and Matriarchs/ Haram al Khalil./ Ibrahimi mosque. I had dreamed for years of being at what many believe to be the tomb of our father Abraham. And, when I finally got there I was moved to tears. I prayed there at his tomb that Abraham's children could come together, could gather in peace, could learn from one another, could respect and love and even cherish one another. I know that it is worth the rest of my life. And, I pray that it becomes a dream for many of us to gather with our father Abraham and to become a family. To bring back those who are far off, to gather in those near by, to love and laugh and eat and pray and sing and live together for the remainder of our days..