



To whom it may concern,

3/2/2016

The project of America is not yet complete. The quest is still underway to nurture a national psyche where *diversity* is respected and celebrated and where *unity* enables us to live side by side in the common project of community. In February 2016 Loras College brought together colleges and universities within a three hour radius to build relationships and train students, staff and faculty in the skills to tell their stories and mobilize interfaith work on their campus.

The River Crossing conference both modeled interfaith cooperation and provided training for people to lead efforts back on campus and in their communities.

Modelling

The day opened with a poignant story of how an alumna of the college had struggled with her own identity, having been raised in a Catholic family and then embracing Agnosticism before entering college. Through her interfaith work on campus she learned that she had a valuable story worth telling that could connect with other non-religious students on campus and communicate reverence for Catholicism and other traditions. She was able to restore her relationship with her family, and come to respect other religious students only after she started building relationships with religiously diverse people through volunteering together, and trying to make her campus more welcoming of all people.

Throughout the day, the 50 participants heard stories from a Catholic, non-religious, Muslim and Jewish person who expressed their commitment to building community together even through many language, cultural and even logistical challenges. Through the distinctiveness of their beliefs and practices, each of these people were modelling how to maintain relationships with people with whom they disagree on ultimate concerns. They also shared excellent tips for how to get started, whether one lives in a diverse or homogenous community, even when people are afraid of saying or doing the wrong thing or feel daunted about making any impact on a major social challenge. These women and men, young and older, newcomer and long-standing resident, inspired the participants, myself included.

Training

In addition to inspiration and modelling how to build interfaith relationships back home, students, staff and faculty participated in workshops that helped them develop their own stories that teach information about a particular tradition, that reveal a shared value across two different religious or non-religious identities, and that mobilize others to act together. Despite many people just meeting for the first time that day, participants began to share stories about what they valued in a tradition other than their own, times they had experienced bigotry or bias and acted (or shamefully had not), and moments of connection with others despite deep disagreements. At the end of the day, we realized that stories are powerful and that one of the greatest roles we can play is to tell stories of cooperation, mutual inspiration, interjecting amidst injustice and working together to tackle major problems.

It was an honor to be part of Loras College's World Interfaith Harmony Week. I know the impact of their diligent, thoughtful and collaborative work will reach well beyond Dubuque and well beyond that week. To the refugees who are resettling in college towns across the country, to religious minorities on campus, to non-religious young people looking for productive ways to partner with faith communities' powerful social efforts, Loras College is living their own Catholic commitment that while our beauty and strength is in our diversity, we are better working together.

Best,

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