

TESTIMONIAL FOR

The Third Community Interfaith Discussion, held on March 4, 2018

I attended the Interfaith Book Club's Third Community Interfaith Discussion, organized by Shaheen Akhtar. The program centered around a book - *Sacred Ground: Pluralism Prejudice and the Promise of America*, by Eboo Patel.

The event was very well organized, from the Meet and Greet over refreshments to the small group discussions, to excellent sharing from each facilitator of wonderful ideas from their group. I was delighted to see approximately a hundred people from Boston to Worcester; representing their communities and faiths; including people who were Jewish, Muslim, and a variety of Christian denominations.

Shaheen Akhtar, the leader, who organized and put into motion this semi-annual event, has had experience in the realm of relaying the meaning and possibilities of interfaith work. She has been leading interfaith meetings, presentations, and events for over twenty years. Her experience has brought a high level of civic involvement and personal commitment.

Shaheen passed out questions for the participants to consider and discuss; as well as, a most impressive list of twenty action items, from the 2nd Community Interfaith Discussion. One of the items, which stood out to me from the list was, "Being proud of your own religion is good, but connecting with people regardless of their religion is very important."

The unique part of this event was that participants sat at different tables, with friends and couples separating. This helped each participant hear more different perspectives and hear a wider variety of personal experiences. Discussions covered many points of view leading to a better understanding and appreciation of interfaith relations. The stories shared at my table were very inspiring.

Each table discussion was led by a facilitator who was a member of the Book Club or involved in some form of interfaith activity. The facilitators were knowledgeable and adept in leading the discussions for an hour. After the table discussions, we gathered together and each facilitator summed up their table's discussion regarding the meaning of interfaith, how to continue, expand, and transfer the ideas of what interfaith means to others, and how to translate that into actual activities.

My table discussion facilitator was an American Baptist Minister, who was inspired to join the Interfaith Book Club after attending one of Shaheen's 'Islam 101' workshops.

Shaheen made everyone feel at home with her opening remarks. She noted that this gathering also recognizes United Nation's World Interfaith Harmony Week where gatherings like this are happening all around the world.

She was very moving in her welcome by saying that we make a place holy by who we welcome and how we relate to each other. Also, she reminded us of the need to affirm the holiness of our relationships.

She challenged us with: “How do we make the ‘other’ feel included in the American Dream, which is the promise of America.”

She invited the table groups to reflect on Patel’s definition of pluralism: ‘to see the other side, to defend another people, not despite your tradition, but because of it, is the heart of pluralism.’” She called it “beautiful!”

The stories shared at my table, of interfaith outreach, and the facilitators report at the end were very inspiring. People genuinely shared their concerns, and their attempts to bring people from different faiths, to a better understanding of each other. This event was a major step forward in that regard.

Shaheen’s send-off was just as amazing. She talked about drawing her inspiration from Prophet Muhammad’s examples of interfaith cooperation. She emphasized the need for gatherings like this to take place in every town. She urged everyone to continue this conversation on interfaith cooperation, to work together for the good of humanity.

The ideas shared at the discussions were impactful. I am confident that this will help us in building strong interfaith communities.

This discussion was quite inspiring for me. I truly hope all of this catches fire, and burns brightly in our world, as it did this day in Wayland.

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