

Extending Our Embrace

Program Description Summary

Our program began with a warm welcome and general introduction of WIHW by Father Prakash, the Director of the Office for Interreligious Dialogue, followed by an acknowledgment of the indigenous peoples whose land we are standing on by Lisa Malcolm. The singing bowl rang and we invited people to place their hands on their hearts and extend their love like the sound of the singing bowl in ever-widening circles out into the world.



In the Introduction to the importance of this year's theme Kathy Murtha asserted that the fundamental origin and on-going momentum of all our religious traditions lies precisely in the call to extend our embrace. The examples offered were the Sikh Langar, the Buddhist Bodhisattva, Jesus' Healing Touch, Islam's origin in the call to move beyond a tribal identity and loyalty to a larger sense of community and the Indigenous peoples' gift of extending their embrace to include the earth itself and all its creatures.

The introduction was followed by a moving dance interpretation of the Song "People All Over the World." Nine dancers from St. Marguerite d'Youville High School danced in their own home, in their own zoom box to the words: "People over the world, reach out your hand, touch one another."

Attendees were then invited to take a moment of silence and recall a person in their life or their faith community who has lived with "Arms Outstretched." Dorothy Day was offered as a Christian example and 18-year-old Anjali Kaur Ghajminger, from the

Sikh community spoke about the saintly Bhai Kanhaiya who brought comfort and water to the wounded and dying on both sides of the battlefield. After speaking Anjali presented a time-lapse video of her art piece capturing this poignant expression of a Sikh “Extending their Embrace.” Five-year-old, Avani Kaur Sidhu then shared what the Golden Rule meant to her and wished everyone a “Happy WIHW!”

The central part of the program featured four speakers who have received positive national and or international media attention, along with artists from diverse faith traditions. The presenters came from locations ranging from Vancouver, the far west of Canada to Iran and they ranged in ages from five years old to elders of a distinguished age. There were representations from the Jewish, Muslim, Sikh, Christian, Buddhist and Indigenous communities.

Nick Gunz, a member of City Shul Synagogue, shared his delightful story of reaching out to a stranger across the country to return a diary that she wrote as a nine-year-old girl, nearly 40 years ago. The long-lost diary had remained hidden in Nick’s parents’ attic all those years and was just recently discovered. This act of reaching out sparked the beginnings of a new and surprising friendship. The author of the long-lost diary, Alison Jenkins, just happened to be an accomplished songwriter and singer and she graciously shared with us one of her own compositions that spoke to the theme.

We were very privileged to have Cheryl Perera as one of our key presenters. Cheryl shared the story of how she was inspired by a Grade 10 teacher to delve into the plight of child trafficking. She founded the internationally renowned organization OneChild. This organization is the first in the world empowering children and youth to combat the sex trafficking of children. Cheryl has been listed as one of the 100 most influential women in Canada and has been appointed to the order of Ontario.

Tariq Syed, a Torontonian business analyst, shared the story of how he was stocking up on essentials with his young daughter during the Pandemic when they noticed a number of senior citizens shopping alone, struggling with mobility and unable to find key provisions. Two days later, Tariq described, he started the Good Neighbor project

which connects available, able-bodied individuals with people in need. Tariq, who has been listed as one of Toronto's Pandemic Heroes, ended his presentation by presenting the real inspiration behind this outreach, his young daughter, Hannah. Hannah warmly waved and greeted all the attendees.

The final speaker was the Buddhist monk Dr. Bhante Saranapala, the founder of "Canada: A Mindful and Kind Nation." Dr. Bhante, the "Urban Monk" as he is commonly known, shared with us how the practice of mindfulness meditation can enable us to extend our compassionate embrace.

Artists from diverse faith traditions offered various creative expressions of the theme "Extending Our Embrace." Zoha Sojoudi, a student at the As-Sadiq Islamic School in Toronto presented a powerful spoken word piece entitled, "Heavenly Crown" from her home in Iran. Hyla Beauvais, a 10-year-old Jewish girl, recited a poem. Sinan Samil Ilhan, a gifted Calligrapher from the Intercultural Dialogue Institute, provided us with a time-lapsed video of his calligraphy expressing the theme. Students from Madonna High School Media Arts Class offered us inspiring photographs. Vanessa Curran, a student from Sacred Heart High School presented the third panel of her triptych art which spoke about compassion. Using spoken word and visual art portraying a girl behind a mask another Sacred Heart student, Jewella Bernadette Macabenta, spoke of seeing a light and smile behind the mask. She said, "If one part of the body suffers, we all suffer." The final creative expression was by Diane Montreuil, an Eastern Metis Algonquin, whose art displays the Indigenous Teachings of the Grandmothers. Diane shared three of her colorful paintings and spoke of the Indigenous insight into "Extending Our Embrace" that are reflected in these pieces.

The closing began with Daniel Niamat reading Albert Einstein's quote on "widening our circle of compassion to embrace all living creatures and the whole of nature in its beauty." The African concept of "Ubuntu- A belief in the universal bond that connects us all" was shared by Susan HooKong Taylor along with a touching story about how this truth is lived out among African children.

Our grand finale consisted in a Closing Ritual and Prayer which involved committee members extending a candle to each other through the zoom boxes while reciting a prayer “Take my Light and My Heart to. . .” This ‘tour de force’ entailed several hours of practice. But it was well worth the effort given the number of astonished comments we received.

In closing, Superintendent Michael Caccamo asked attendees to reflect on how they could extend their embrace in this moment in time. He informed them that they would be receiving information regarding possible follow up actions. Fr. Prakash thanked one and all and invited us to Go Light Our World! While the acknowledgment and credit slides rolled Susan HooKong-Taylor performed Kathy Troccoli’s song “Go Light Your World.” The last slide said “Thank You” and recaptured the original image of our poster of a figure looking out into the universe with their arms extended.