

Beyond Tolerance: From Mono-religious to Multi-religious Life at Wellesley College

Victor H. Kazanjian, Jr. and the Students of the Wellesley College Multi-faith Council

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In the center of the hundred-year old Protestant Christian chapel, Jackie, a senior who is the Jewish representative on the multi-faith student council at Wellesley College, moves to the front of the stage on which women from Bahá'í, Buddhist, Christian, Hindu, Jain, Jewish, Muslim, Sikh, Unitarian Universalist, and Wiccan traditions are gathered. "It hurts me when people think that Jews are racist," she says. The silence that follows is excruciating. Those who are gathered to watch this performance-piece on religious pluralism that reflects the experience of these women begin to squirm. Slowly but confidently, Desiree, a senior who is of African descent and the Christian representative on the council, steps towards Jackie. She gently touches her on the shoulder and says, "But Jackie, some Jews are racist!" Jackie pulls away sharply and then responds, "And some Christians, too!" The tension builds. Simi, who is Sikh, turns to Anindita, who is Hindu, and shouts, "And Hindus!" "That's right!" adds Yasmeen, the Muslim representative. Suddenly, conflict consumes the group.¹

It had taken us six years to reach the point where this multi-faith group of stu-

dents could risk a public presentation like this; six years of slowly building a foundation of trust and understanding; six years of creating a new model for engaging the growing religious diversity within the Wellesley College community. In the fall of 1998, at the EDUCATION as *Transformation* national gathering, the Multi-faith Student Council at Wellesley College was ready to share their story with others. In the context of a multi-faith celebration on the second day of the gathering, students from the council presented a performance piece called "Beyond Tolerance" which uses drama, music, song, dance and ritual to tell the story of the encounters that these students had with each other over a three year period as they worked towards building a multi-faith community. The essential message of the piece is that it is possible for people of different religious traditions to celebrate the uniqueness of their own tradition while also seeing the beauty and truth of other religions. This is the essence of religious pluralism.

The impact of this performance-piece in the context of the spiritual celebration at the national gathering was obvious. All of the speeches and panel discussions on religious pluralism and spirituality which had formed the basis of the national gathering up to that point became embodied in these students. No longer was religious pluralism simply a concept, but rather religious pluralism was Colby, Antonia, Desiree, Anindita, Lisa, Jackie, Yasmeen, Simi, Allaire and Sarah. Like everyone else, I watched with a sense of wonder and awe as these students brought to life not just the possibility of pluralism, but the reality of it. As I listened to the comments of participants afterwards, so visibly moved by the experience, I was heartened to see that people were as inspired by these remarkable women as I certainly am. But I was also concerned that those observing this performance were unaware of the time-consuming, complicated process that had led up to the creation of this moment. Without this history, there is no way to understand how religious pluralism had emerged at Wellesley.

This essay is an attempt to fill in that missing context and to offer something of the story of the journey that we have shared at Wellesley College; a journey from mono-religious to multi-religious community which has taken us beyond tolerance. This has been a profoundly relational process. It is the joint creation of the chaplains, advisors and students who over a six year period have devoted themselves to exploring the uncharted territory of that which lies beyond tolerance and towards interdependence. And so I want to begin by acknowledging each of them as my co-authors in this process. I have listed their names at the conclusion of this essay. These words are as much theirs as mine.

A JOURNEY BEGINS

The “Beyond Tolerance” performance-piece begins with ten women moving onto the stage to the rhythm of traditional Native African drumming and song. Each stands alone. Then when all of the students have taken their places, they begin to speak one at a time. (The words at the beginning of each section represent the “script” written and performed by the students in “Beyond Tolerance” at the national gathering.)

- Colby: *I am Bahá'í.*
Antonia: *I am Buddhist.*
Desiree: *I am Christian.*
Anindita: *I am Hindu.*
Lisa: *I am Jain.*
Jackie: *I am Jewish*
Yasmeen: *I am Muslim.*
Simi: *I am Sikh.*
Allaire: *I am Unitarian Universalist.*
Sarah: *I am Wiccan*
- Colby: *I believe in the progressive revelation of all prophets.*
Antonia: *I follow the path of Buddha.*
Desiree: *Jesus is my Savior.*
Anindita: *I worship Durga, Lakshmi, Saraswati, Krishna, Shiva.*
Lisa: *I follow the teachings of Mahavirswami and the 23 other Thirthankars.*
Jackie: *I follow the teachings of the Torah.*
Yasmeen: *I believe there is no God but Allah, and the Prophet Mohammed, may peace be upon him, is His messenger and prophet.*
Simi: *I believe in one God. Waheguru and the 10 Gurus are my teachers.*
Allaire; *I seek my own truth drawing from the wisdom of all traditions.* Sarah: *The Goddess is my Mother.*
- Colby: *To be Bahá'í is to practice the oneness of humanity.*
Antonia: *To be Buddhist is to live mindfully in the present.*
Desiree: *To be Christian is to follow Christ's example of love and justice.*
Anindita: *To be Hindu is to see unity in many aspects of God.*
Lisa: *To be Jain is to try to reach an inner peace and to let the soul become free from attachments .*
Jackie: *To be Jewish is be part of a community.*
Yasmeen: *To be Muslim means being in submission to the will of Allah.*
Simi: *To be Sikh is to stand up for what is right and true.*
Allaire: *To be a Unitarian Universalist is to be constantly questioning.*
Sarah: *To be Wiccan is to be in attunement with nature.*

In 1992 the president and trustees of Wellesley College made the rather startling decision that, in seeking to better prepare students for leadership in the world, they would reexamine the role of religious life and spirituality in Wellesley's educational experience. After nearly a century of shedding the constraints placed upon academic institutions by their religious founders, this was an unusual step, to say the least, for a secular, liberal arts institution. At a time when most academic institutions, confused by a mono-religious and mono-cultural institutional history and a multi-religious, multi-cultural contemporary community, were abandoning even the rather harmless service of providing religious support for students, Wellesley's efforts seemed unusual. In addition, to suggest that spirituality, even free from its institutional religious context, plays an essential role in a college's basic educational mission, was certain to be seen as antithetical to secular education. This, however, is precisely what Wellesley College set out to do by creating a multi-faith religious and spiritual life program under the direction of a new position of dean of religious and spiritual life.

The goal of the proposed program was to develop a pluralistic multi-faith community in which all particular expressions of religious faith were celebrated and in which dialogue about common moral and ethical principles was nurtured. This goal challenged the common practice of many colleges and universities, which assumes that the religious and spiritual life of a diverse educational community can adequately be served by a program in which there is still one dominant religious tradition (usually Protestant Christian), around whom everyone else must orient themselves. Wellesley was interested in

dismantling its old Protestant Christian-dominated structures and creating a program which reflected the principles of religious pluralism and multi-culturalism while honoring its history as well. To do this, Wellesley created the position of dean of religious and spiritual life. The dean was to create and oversee a program that nurtured people of all religious traditions and spiritual practices and begin a process of exploring areas of spirituality and education with faculty, students and staff. The position of dean was designed specifically not to represent any one religious tradition on campus. In this way, the dean would not function as a chaplain in a particular tradition, but as an administrator and spiritual leader for the whole college.

I arrived at Wellesley in February of 1993, with a professional background as an Episcopal priest and community organizer. My work prior to Wellesley centered mostly around social change and, in particular, conflict resolution and economic justice in diverse communities in San Francisco, the South Bronx, and Boston. This vocational work was a reflection of my personal background and particularly the influence of my two grandfathers. My paternal grandfather, Varastad Kazanjian, passed on to me the gift of difference in my Armenian identity, and a belief in the necessity of community. My maternal grandfather, Harold Case, former president of Boston University along with his dear friend and colleague Howard Thurman, dean of Marsh Chapel at Boston University, taught me to see the beauty and truth in people of all religions, races and cultures. Now at the age of 33, I found myself with the unique opportunity to give concrete form to a vision of a global spiritual community of which I had heard Dr. Thurman speak so often when I was a child; a vision of the wholeness of the human community in which one could celebrate the particularity of one's own experience without diminishing the beauty of another's, and thereby glimpse a more complete image of the divine.

In the twenty or so years before 1993, religious life at Wellesley College was led by a full-time college chaplain who was the Protestant Christian chaplain, a part-time Hillel director/Jewish chaplain, and a part-time Roman Catholic Christian chaplain. (Prior to this time, it had been the responsibility of the president, the faculty and local clergy to provide religious and spiritual leadership for the College.) In 1990, in her final act as college chaplain, Connie Chandler Ward put forth the analysis that religious life at the College would no longer be well served by a model which was centered around a Protestant Christian college chaplain and recommended that a non-religion-specific dean be hired to create a new model. My initial work as Wellesley's first dean of religious and spiritual life was to enter into dialogue with people from various religious traditions on campus, some organized into groups and some not, in order to learn about their needs and about their vision for how religious and spiritual life might be a more integrated element of the educational experience on campus. In addition, I met with faculty, trustees, alumnae, staff and students, some of whom identified with religious groups and many who did not, in order to get a sense of the larger community in which this program was to be created.

Time and time again, the message that I heard from people of all religious and spiritual traditions, as well as those outside of religious traditions, was that the current model was obsolete and ineffective. As with many efforts in inter-religious cooperation, Wellesley had fallen prey to the belief that in order to bring people of different traditions together, one had to find a common, neutral context in which everyone felt comfortable and in which no one was offended. The result was the stripping of all particularistic experience from community rituals and programs, leaving a kind of universalistic mush in which no one's unique perspective was reflected. The paradox, of course, was that even with this universalizing tendency, the ethos of the college remained Protestant Christian, in part because the official religious leader of the college was the Protestant chaplain (her rather remarkable work in serving the whole community regardless of religion notwithstanding.) The non-Christians still felt as though they were outsiders in a community where Christianity remained normative and the Christians felt as though their tradition had been lost in the attempts to universalize.

During the discussions about recreating religious life at Wellesley, the college had considered doing away with the religious life program altogether. But a coalition of students, administrators and trustees persuaded the president and the board that the spiritual well-being of members of the Wellesley community was an integral part of Wellesley's original mission and remained an essential ingredient in its contemporary goals of educating women who will make a difference in the world.

There are many people who helped to make this original idea of a multi-faith community a reality at Wellesley. In 1992, then President Nan Keohane, Dean of Students Molly Campbell, and Associate Dean of Students Joanne Murray, carried the vision in its early stages. Current Dean of Students Geneva Walker Johnson and many other alumnae, faculty, staff and trustees have been vital to the development of this program. But it is safe to say that the arrival of Diana Chapman Walsh as president of Wellesley, six

months after my arrival in 1993, transformed the process completely. As is evident by her introduction to this volume, President Walsh effortlessly articulates a vision for higher education that necessitates pluralism and includes spirituality. She continues to be an inspiration for me and a leader in the movement towards a more holistic educational process, not only at Wellesley, but also across the nation.

TELLING OUR STORIES, SPEAKING OUR TRUTHS

Colby: I have so many memories as a child...of monthly holy day fasts,
Antonia: of pouring sweet tea over the baby Buddha on Hanamatsuri,
Desiree: of stories of the life of Jesus at bedtime,
Anindita: of my mother doing Lakshmi puja every Thursday,
Lisa: of talking to my guru about all kinds of religious questions,
Jackie: of lighting Shabbat candles,
Yasmeen: of going to Makkah with my parents and praying in the Great Mosque,
Simi: of singing Shabads in Gurdwara,
Allaire: of reading poems about the beauty of nature,
Sarah: of doing rituals with my family on the full moon.

My experience in conflict resolution and diversity training taught me that the most creative encounters between people of different identities begins with the sharing of their stories. But even before bringing people together to speak their stories and listen to the stories of others, it is necessary that each religious community have a sense of its own identity and place at the college. Although beginning by strengthening the particular in order to achieve pluralism seems to be counter-intuitive, it is a crucial first step. Only when religious groups feel as though they have a well-established home for the celebration and practice of their traditions are they likely to engage in the work of building multi-faith community. At Wellesley, the first step in this process was to create a team of chaplains and religious advisors who would take up the task of nurturing their particular religious communities while engaging as a team in exploring new dimensions of inter-religious dialogue.

The vision of a multi-faith team of advisors, led by a dean, called for thoughtful consideration not only of the current needs of the Wellesley College community, but also its future needs. The diversity that is transforming America is transforming her colleges and universities as well. Students from Muslim, Hindu, Buddhist and many other traditions comprise a growing and significant part of student, and often faculty and staff, populations. At a residential college like Wellesley, the dormitory has become the first place where the impact of this growing diversity is being felt. Students of different religious traditions and practices are thrown together and expected to figure out how to create a common life. In some cases, students from religious communities that are literally at war with each other are asked to be roommates, without any clear advise on how to engage the situation. In addition, issues of religious food restrictions and holy day work prohibitions are becoming an increasing source of conflict and confusion in academic communities. The needs of these “newcomer” communities have outstripped the capacities of staff or faculty members who have in the past volunteered their time as religious advisors to these communities. The need for a team of professional advisors who would provide support to their own religious communities and also be a resource to the whole community on issues of religious difference was becoming poignantly clear.

My belief was that for this envisioned group of religious advisors to adequately explore the movement from a mono-religious to a multi-religious community, they needed to live the questions and the conflict. Therefore, it was necessary to have on-campus advisors whose job descriptions indicated that a portion of their time be spent on multi-faith work. The notion that people can navigate the treacherous waters of inter-religious cooperation in their spare time is absurd. The work of inter-religious dialogue and multi-faith community-building requires specific skills and enormous effort. Creating a team of religious advisors who are part of the College’s administrative staff and who devote professional time to multi-religious work, has been essential to the development of our program. This enabled us to function as a team, meeting regularly for conversation/reflection/study and program planning, and to engage in professional training in conflict resolution and cross-cultural dialogue. Further, this reinforced that the religious advisors, as part of the student services division, were accountable to the educational mission of the College.

When I arrived at Wellesley, only the position of Hillel director/Jewish chaplain was solidly in place and she, Rabbi Ilene Lerner Bogosian, had been an integral part of the search process for a dean of religious and spiritual life. Through conversations with members of each religious and spiritual group on campus, it was determined that additional advisors were immediately necessary for the Buddhist, Hindu, Muslim,

Protestant Christian, Roman Catholic Christian and Unitarian Universalist communities. The College agreed to seek funds for these positions through an annual appeal to alumnae, modeled after the very successful fundraising which supports Wellesley Hillel. While this effort was being established, the College agreed to make funds available to establish these positions. In developing the structure for each religious group on campus we drew heavily from Hillel's experience. It was decided that each religious tradition would have an advisory board of alumnae, faculty, staff and students. Each board would then work with the dean to support the life of their community. Representatives from each advisory board also served on a multi-faith advisory group to the dean. Eventually this group took up the task of overseeing the annual fundraising process for the religious and spiritual life program. To have peaceful and productive inter-religious dialogue is a formidable task, but many people warned us that to try raising money together was simply foolhardy. They were wrong. The work of this group continues to be one of the most inspiring aspects of our work together.

It is significant to note that one of the defining moments in the early development of this program came when Wellesley Hillel not only voted to support the multi-faith model and the new, and, as of yet, untested religious life structure, but agreed to fold its very successful fundraising program into the collaborative multi-faith fundraising effort to raise the funds necessary for the support of all religious groups. There have been many moments when people showed great courage in their willingness to pursue the dream of a pluralistic religious community at Wellesley, but none was more significant than this moment. Hillel had a lot to lose and very little to gain (at least financially) from this effort and yet the alumnae board unanimously voted to not only be a partner in the process but to provide leadership for this effort. It is a moment I will always remember.

For the past six years, members of the Religious Life Team have, through their deep commitment to nurturing the lives of their own communities and engaging in inter-religious dialogue, brought to fruition a multi-faith vision of a community committed to religious pluralism. At the same time that the Religious Life Team of advisors and chaplains was beginning their work, the student Multi-faith Council, formally the Interfaith Council, came together in a new way. The purpose of the council was to explore the possibility of religious pluralism through a process of dialogue among student representatives from as many different religious and spiritual groups as possible.

In 1993, 14 of the 16 student religious groups active on Wellesley's campus were Christian (the other two were Jewish and Muslim). And yet the Wellesley College community included students from Bahá'í, Buddhist, Hindu, Jain, Native African, Native American, Shinto, Sikh, Taoist, Unitarian Universalist, Wiccan and Zoroastrian traditions, as well as a host of spiritual seekers who did not define their practice within the context of institutional religion. At that time, the student Interfaith Council was made up of representatives of all official student religious groups on campus. The obvious problem was that the makeup of the group was therefore 7/8ths Christian. It was clear that if we were to explore the possibility of a multi-faith community in which each religious and spiritual tradition was equally valued and had equal voice, the structure of the council needed to be changed. To do this we needed to get beyond proportional representation.

Does the fact that there are fifteen hundred Christians and two Jains at Wellesley College give Christians a right to a privileged voice? In seeking religious pluralism, the answer must be NO! One analogy is to think of this work as more like the United States Senate than the House of Representatives. Two representatives from each state/religious community, regardless of population, are necessary for there to be a balanced dialogue. Initially it was necessary for me to spend a great deal of time working with the Christian community to help them understand that, in the work of religious pluralism, they are one religious community and that the fragmentation of Christianity into denominations was not an excuse for multiple representation. (There is at least as much diversity among Buddhists, Hindus, Jews, Muslims etc., and yet we most often treat each of them as singular religious communities in inter-religious initiatives.) Applying this principle meant the transforming of the old Interfaith Council made up of 14 Christian representatives (Congregational, Episcopal, Evangelical, Lutheran, Intervarsity Christian Fellowship, Campus Crusade for Christ, etc.), a Jewish representative and a Muslim representative, into a Multi-faith Council with two representatives from each of the religious groups represented in the Wellesley College community (Bahá'í, Buddhist, Christian, Hindu, Jain, Jewish, Muslim, Native African, Native American, Shinto, Sikh, Taoist, Unitarian Universalist, Wiccan and Zoroastrian).

It is important to note that in a pluralistic model, where people from each religious group are encouraged to bring the fullness of their tradition to the dialogue, religious exclusivists have a voice. I am fond of saying that ours is not a program based on a group of like-minded religious folks holding hands and

singing unity songs. In the course of the past six years we have had students on the multi-faith council and participating in the religious life programs from various traditions, including Christianity, Judaism, and Islam, who self-describe as conservative, orthodox, evangelical and fundamentalist. I am a pluralist and a Christian, and although I may disagree profoundly with those who believe in exclusivist principles, I am also committed to their right to speak and practice their faith (as long as it does not violate the rights of others).² Only if we can live this conflict in an intentional way can we discover creative ways to transform it.

As soon as the Religious Life Team and Multi-faith Council began to meet, the work took off. We began by listening to the stories of each tradition and not just the stories from holy books or the official doctrine, but also personal stories about what it was like for each person to live their lives as a Buddhist or Jew or Muslim. During these sessions we adopted several principles of dialogue which guided our discussions:

- Speak from your experience as a person within a tradition and not on behalf of the tradition as a whole;
- To ensure equity of voice, it is critical that each member has the opportunity to speak their story and listen to the stories of others;
- To create a safe space in which to share stories we must recognize and respect each other's perspectives as authentic. We need not agree with, or even fully understand someone else's story, in order to respect it. At the same time safety does not mean unanimity or avoiding conflict. Conflict is an essential part of this process;
- If someone says something that you do not understand, ask her to elaborate;
- If someone says something to which you have a strong reaction, share it when it happens;
- All questions are valid and necessary;
- Answer questions posed to you to the best of your ability, but it is equally acceptable to say, "I don't know;" and,
- Asking and answering questions is a way of both learning about others and being drawn deeper into one's own tradition.

The Religious Life Team and Multi-faith Council used a variety of different designs for their work. Our intent was that our meetings would be less about business and more about encounter. At both the weekly meetings, and fall, winter and spring retreats, there was always time set aside for members to share a teaching from their tradition. Meetings also always included time for being with each other in reflection, meditation or prayer, each according to their own tradition, or witnessing each other's forms of worship or practice. During one year we divided the year into segments and studied each of the religions represented in the groups. During another year we read and discussed several books and articles on religious and spiritual themes. The student Multi-faith Council developed learning "games" such as:

1. *Two Truths and a Lie*, in which each group member presents three things about their religious tradition to the group, two of which are true and one of which is not. The group then tries to guess which is untrue.
2. *1 Minute Drill*, in which group members, in pairs, attempt to find out as much as they can about their partner's religious tradition.
3. *Everything You've Always Wanted to Know About My Religion But Were Afraid to Ask*, a question and answer period dedicated to questions that are hard to ask about someone else's religious tradition. Questions are sometimes submitted on cards anonymously and after a while asked directly.
4. *Multi-faith Pictionary*, in which groups try and guess which religion is being represented by the drawing of clues on newsprint.
5. *Prejudices and Stereotypes*, an exercise in which the group lists as many

stereotypes as they can think of for each tradition and discusses how stereotypes and prejudices emerge.

6. *Children's Story Hour*, group members tell stories about their religion that they learned as children.

In addition, members of each group brought in religious symbols/items important to them from their religious tradition, and shared rituals and their meanings with the group. It was this last exercise of sharing rituals with each other that gave us an idea for bringing the rest of the community into this learning process.

FLOWER SUNDAY—TRANSFORMING COMMUNITY RITUALS AT WELLESLEY

Colby: I remember learning about the teachings of Bahá'u'lláh

Antonia: about the teaching of the Buddha

Desiree: about the teachings from the Bible

Anindita: about the teachings from the Gita

Lisa: about the teachings from the Agam Sutra

Jackie: about the teachings from the Torah

Yasmeen: about the teachings from the Qur'an

Simi: about the teachings from the Guru Granth Sahib

Allaire: about the teachings of past Unitarian Universalists

Sarah: about the lessons of all living things

Colby: and I remember dancing for peace

Antonia: chanting the Bell Chant

Desiree: singing hymns

Anindita: singing bhajans

Lisa: and doing samaik and pratikaman.

Jackie: I remember praying during the Shabbat service

Yasmeen: the call to prayer

Simi: chanting Waheguru at religious camp

Allaire: exchanging flowers to celebrate community

Sarah: and dancing around the May pole.

The Religious Life Team and student Multi-faith Council have over the years offered a series of discussion and educational programs to the broader college community. The structure and themes of these programs ranged from lectures on different religious traditions to dorm-based discussions on whether it is possible to be religious and a scholar. But to draw members of the community into a deeper experience of religious pluralism, we focused our work on creating new forms of community ritual.

Wellesley College has a long tradition of community rituals, most of which originated from its Protestant Christian past. As the community changed, becoming more culturally and religiously diverse, most of these rituals were abandoned. The ones that remained, Flower Sunday (a beginning of the year community gathering on the theme of friendship) and Baccalaureate (a spiritual celebration the day before commencement), had become hopelessly watered down and poorly attended. As the Religious Life Team and student Multi-faith Council explored ways to invite the broader college community to experience the work of religious pluralism, it seemed that these rituals might be useful.

To begin this process it was necessary for us to set aside the structure of these rituals, which were based on Protestant Christian liturgical forms, and create new structures into which each group could offer something from their own tradition with integrity. We needed to get beyond the feeling that non-Christian traditions were being graciously included in a Christian experience, to a place where we were creating something totally new out of the authentic offerings from each tradition. At first, and to some degree to this day, questions remain about just what we are doing when we gather for these multi-faith community celebrations. Is it worship? When the Buddhist chaplain offers the bell chant as a call to gather, what does that mean for the non-Buddhists? Are those gathered simply spectators at a performance, or actual participants in religious ritual? Good questions, the answers to which we are still living out.

IN CREATING THESE RITUALS, WE ARE CAREFUL NOT TO ASK PEOPLE TO PARTICIPATE IN A DEVOTIONAL PRACTICE FROM A RELIGION OTHER THAN THEIR OWN, BUT RATHER TO EXPERIENCE THE VARIOUS FORMS OF SONG, DANCE, AND SPOKEN WORD FROM DIVERSE TRADITIONS, NOT AS SPECTATORS AT AN EVENT, BUT AS RECIPIENTS OF A GIFT. THE CHALLENGE OF CREATING SUCH A RITUAL CELEBRATION IS TO MAKE IT

PARTICIPATORY RATHER THAN SPECTATORY, WORSHIP RATHER THAN PERFORMANCE, SOMETHING RELEVANT TO THE BROADEST POSSIBLE GATHERING AND YET WITH OFFERINGS FROM PARTICULAR TRADITIONS. OUR MULTI-FAITH CELEBRATIONS OCCUR SIX TIMES DURING THE YEAR, FOUR TIMES FOR STUDENTS AND TWICE FOR ALUMNAE. THEY ARE HELD IN THE CHAPEL, WHICH WE ACKNOWLEDGE IS A SPACE ORIGINALLY CONSTRUCTED FOR A PARTICULAR TRADITION BUT WHICH WE ARE NOW USING FOR A PLURALISTIC PURPOSE. (THIS WAS ONLY POSSIBLE ONCE SPACE WAS MADE AVAILABLE TO MEET THE NEEDS OF PARTICULAR RELIGIOUS GROUPS, INCLUDING A MUSLIM PRAYER ROOM, BUDDHIST AND HINDU MEDITATION ROOMS, AND A SMALL MULTI-FAITH CHAPEL NOW USED BY 14 DIFFERENT RELIGIONS.) THESE RITUALS HAVE GROWN AND CHANGED OVER THE SIX YEARS. THEY HAVE BECOME ALIVE AGAIN AND A PART OF THE WELLESLEY EXPERIENCE. MORE THAN 1300 STUDENTS GATHER FOR THE FLOWER SUNDAY CELEBRATION OF FRIENDSHIP TO THE SOUND OF AFRICAN DRUMMING, BUDDHIST CHANTING, HINDU DANCING, CHRISTIAN SINGING, A READING AND REFLECTION ON THE TORAH, THE QUR'AN, AND MUCH MORE. AND AS PRESIDENT WALSH OR DEAN WALKER-JOHNSON RISES TO LEAD THE GATHERING IN A RESPONSIVE READING OR MEDITATION/PRAYER, IT NOW FEELS FAMILIAR AND WELCOME, EVEN TO THOSE STUDENTS WHO ARE NOT PART OF ANY RELIGIOUS TRADITION. MOVING BEYOND TOLERANCE

- Colby: *I remember...being told that my religion was a cult;*
 Antonia: *cringing during the pledge of allegiance, "One Nation under God;"*
 Desiree: *being made fun of for carrying my rosary beads;*
 Anindita: *being laughed at for saying that cows are sacred;*
 Lisa: *people criticizing me for being vegetarian and letting my religion control what I eat;*
 Jackie: *being called a Satanist for wearing the Jewish Star;*
 Yasmeen: *a teacher at high school asking me, "Isn't the veil a little too much?"*
 Simi: *my brother's turban being ripped off on a school bus;*
 Allaire: *my friend telling me that Unitarian Universalism wasn't a real religion;*
 Sarah: *my grandmother saying she looked up Pagan in the dictionary and it meant I had no religion;*
- Antonia: *I feel angry when people think Buddhism is something you can just take up, like it's a fad.*
 Desiree: *I get so mad when I'm told that I can't be a real scholar and a Christian.*
 Lisa: *It angers me when people think Jainism is no longer an active religion.*
 Colby: *I hate it when people use religion to oppress others.*
 Sarah: *It makes me mad when people say my pentacle is a sign of Satan.*
 Yasmeen: *How long do I have to put up with hearing that all Muslims are terrorists?*
 Simi: *It infuriates me when people stare at Sikh men and women because they don't shave, because they don't cut their hair, because they wear turbans on their heads.*
 Allaire: *It frustrates me when people think UU is a Christian denomination.*
 Anindita: *It upsets me when Hinduism is exoticized and I see people wearing "body dots" and t-shirts with Hindu deities on them.*
 Jackie: *It hurts me when people think that Jews are racist.*
 Desiree: *But Jackie, some Jew's are racist.*
 Jackie: *And some Christians too.*
 Simi: *And Hindus!*
 Yasmeen: *That's right!*

The group is consumed by conflict, then by a rigid silence.

Perhaps the most profound lesson that institutions such as Wellesley are learning from their experiments with religious pluralism is that tolerance is not the goal that we should seek in forming a pluralistic community. However, in the face of a world punctuated by acts of intolerance, one might ask how tolerance could possibly be an unworthy goal for which to strive.

Throughout history, tolerance has been the goal towards which forward thinking people have worked in seeking to respond to conflict between diverse peoples, while intolerance has led to the massive destruction of life on all corners of the planet. At a time when tolerance has often been replaced by overt acts of hate in communities around the world, a little tolerance seems a worthy goal. History teaches us

otherwise.

Tolerance as the ultimate goal has not and will not lead us to the healthy, peaceful, just society we seek. Tolerance is conflict arrested. It is a great harness applied to the destructive forces of ignorance, fear and prejudice. It provides a wall between warring parties. At best it is a glass wall where protected people can see one another going about living parallel lives. Nonetheless it is still a wall dividing us from each another. As such, tolerance is not a basis for healthy human relationship nor will it ever lead to true community, for tolerance does not allow for learning, growth or transformation, but rather ultimately keeps people in a state of suspended ignorance and conflict.

In many societies tolerance has historically been either democratically legislated or forced upon people by less democratic means. In both cases, the result has been far short of achieving any sense of healthy, interdependent community. During the past several years, we have seen the results of forced tolerance in the horrific ethnic conflict that has followed the unraveling of the former Soviet Union and the former Yugoslavia. Long-standing inter-ethnic conflict was suspended by the imposition of a forced states of tolerance under the guise of nationalistic common identity. But as we have now learned, the conflict did not go away. It stayed festering until the walls of tolerance were taken down, unleashing the fear, frustration and rage that had grown beneath the relatively calm surface afforded by tolerance.

The racial Balkanization of America holds the same lessons as the ethnic fragmentation of the Balkans. Tolerance forced or legislated does not lead to mutual understanding, societal transformation and community. In the United States, tolerance, although democratically legislated, has had a similar effect on our society. Legislated tolerance forms the basis of our civil rights laws today, institutionalizing in our society the principle that particular expressions of gender, race, religion, physical ability and sexual preference should be protected as individual freedoms. However, even with these democratically chosen principles of social tolerance in place, religious prejudice, xenophobia, racial, gender, and sexual orientation-related violence continue to plague American society. Tolerance has not led to the formation of a healthy, interdependent community, but rather a country divided by walls of tolerance, only occasionally crossed and usually for destructive purposes. Tolerance has not protected us from acts of hate but rather cast us in a frozen state of societal fragmentation and ignorance.

As the students of the Multi-faith Council and the advisors and chaplains on the Religious Life Team began to search for ways to deepen their understanding of religious pluralism, they found it necessary to explore the places of conflict amongst themselves and between the religious traditions which they represent. As we began to explore areas of difference and conflict, the level of fear and apprehension grew in the groups. "If we disagree," group members asked, "if we really disagree will we still be able to function as a team?" If not, we agreed, then our work will have little or no meaning to the world. And so to this day, we are still exploring the role of conflict in our work. Perhaps the most powerful reflection of the process was the creation of the Beyond Tolerance Workshop, a training program on dealing with religious difference in which students offer a performance-piece that tells the story of their encounters with each other across lines of religious difference, and then lead participants in a discussion about issues of religious difference, inter-religious conflict and multi-faith community building.

The process of creating the Beyond Tolerance Workshop began by asking the students of the Multi-faith Council to enter into a structured dialogue around these issues. Over a weekend retreat, the members of the Multi-faith Council broke into pairs where each partner was from a different religious or spiritual community. Partners interviewed each other using a series of questions, which are included below. It was important that everyone answer the same questions, but they were also meant to stimulate discussion between partners and to raise additional questions for discussion. After each segment of questions, the group reconvened and each person reported to the whole group significant learnings from the work with their partner.

The answers to these questions, and the stories that were shared between partners and within the group, then became the text for the script of the beyond tolerance performance-piece.

BEYOND TOLERANCE PARTNER INTERVIEWS:

Group members divide into pairs with a partner from a different religious or spiritual tradition. Partners take turns interviewing each other and writing down the answers to each question to share with the whole group later.

Part I—Defining Ourselves

1. With what religious or spiritual tradition or traditions do you most identify?
2. Is there a particular leader/prophet/teacher whom you follow or who is important in your faith?
3. Is there a particular text that has meaning for you?
4. Are there symbols in your tradition which are important to you? What do they mean?
5. What does it mean for you to be a _____(your religion/s?)
6. What memories do you have of practicing or learning about your faith?
7. Could you tell me two or three things about your tradition that would help me understand why it is important for you?
8. What is difficult for you about being _____ (your religion/s?)
9. What do people from other religious traditions not understand about you as a _____(your religion/s?)
10. What do others say or do that upsets you?

The group then reconvenes and each person reports what they learned from their partner in answer to each question and shares any reactions to the process itself.

Part II–Sharing Our Stories

Group members return to discussion with their partners.

If you wanted to show your partner or have your partner experience some aspect of what being a _____ (your religion/s) means to you, what would you do? Imagine using as many different forms of expression as possible including, but not limited to, stories, songs, dances, prayers, or rituals. Choose several of these forms of expression and use them to show your partner some aspect of what your religion means to you.

The group then reconvenes and shares the ideas that were generated with the whole group.

Part III–Encountering Each Other

Again, group members return to work with the same partner.

1. What differences do you see between people of different religious traditions?
2. How does your tradition view other traditions?
3. What tensions do you feel exist between people of your religious tradition and people of other religious traditions?
4. What stereotypes and prejudices do people hold about your religious tradition?
5. What stereotypes and prejudices do people in your religious tradition have about other religious traditions?
6. What gets in the way of people from your religious tradition being able to work in a multi-faith group?
7. What questions would you like to ask your partner as a person of a different religious tradition?

Other possible questions include:

How does your tradition/practice affect your daily life?
 When you pray/meditate/reflect, what do you think about?
 What is your connection to others in your faith?
 Do you ever have questions or doubts about some aspect of your tradition?
 What is the meaning behind your rituals?
 What stories and songs are part of your religion?
 What does your religion do for you? Why do you practice religion?
 Do you experience a divine force or presence?

The group then reconvenes and each individual shares the answers of his or her partner to the questions. Also, the group discusses what it felt like to enter this process. What are the reactions to asking and answering these questions? Was there a particular moment that was significant or inspirational? Was there a moment that was uncomfortable? This is a deep process and it is important to express what it feels like to engage in this work and to maintain connections within the group throughout the experience.

Part IV—Closing Ritual

It is important to periodically pause and acknowledge the importance and complexity of this kind of work. The student Multi-faith Council has developed a ritual closing for our retreats in which we honor the beauty and truth of each other's experience. We begin by passing a bowl of warm water around the circle, dipping our hands in it and allowing them to be dried by the person next to us. Then the partners of different religious traditions who have worked closely together in considering the above questions pair up once again, face to face, and offer the following statement. The final word is never scripted, always spontaneous. (In the sample dialogue below, examples from the Beyond Tolerance performance piece at the national gathering are given.)

Colby to Simi:

I am Bahá'í. You are Sikh and in your eyes I see _____. (Aliveness)

Simi to Colby:

I am Sikh. You are Bahá'í. In your eyes I see _____. (Commitment)

Yasmeen to Anindita:

I am Muslim. You are Hindu. In your eyes I see _____. (Beauty)

Anindita to Yasmeen:

I am Hindu. You are Muslim. In your eyes I see _____. (Faithfulness)

Antonia to Allaire:

I am Buddhist. You are Unitarian Universalist. In your eyes I see _____. (Hope)

Allaire to Antonia:

I am Unitarian Universalist. You are Buddhist. In your eyes I see _____. (Contentment)

Lisa to Sarah:

I am Jain. You are Wiccan. In your eyes I see _____. (Passion)

Sarah to Lisa:

I am Wiccan. You are Jain. In your eyes I see _____. (Reverence)

Desiree to Jackie:

I am Christian. You are Jewish. In your eyes I see _____. (Such Love)

Jackie to Desiree:

I am Jewish. You are Christian. In your eyes I see _____. (Spirit)

In his concluding remarks at the 1998 national gathering, Vincent Harding offered the following reflections in reference to the Beyond Tolerance multi-faith celebration. He said,

I have a feeling, and I am taking this home with me, that at the multi-faith celebration offered by the students yesterday, we were visiting the future, and the future was visiting us. And as I go home, I am promising myself that I want to be faithful to that vision all the rest of my life.³

I feel profoundly blessed to have been a part of this experience and to have been in the company of so many loving, courageous and deeply spiritual people who have been a part of the religious life program at Wellesley. In closing I would like to offer you their names as a way of honoring the sacred work in which they have been and continue to be engaged.

Those members of the Religious Life Team who participated in this project include: Ilene Lerner Bogosian, Rabbi and Hillel director; Cheryl Chip, assistant to the dean; John Culloty, Catholic chaplain; Mary Foulke, Protestant chaplain; Laura Hawes, Buddhist community advisor; Fatimah Iliasu, Muslim advisor; Ji Hyang Sunim, Buddhist community advisor; Gerdes Fleurant, advisor for Native African traditions; Erika Jefferson, Protestant chaplain; Sue Koehler, Catholic chaplain; Katie Krauss, Muslim advisor; Kathe Lewis, assistant to the dean; Nurya Love Lindberg, Unitarian Universalist Chaplain; Judith LoGerfo, associate Catholic chaplain; Stephanie Nichols, Unitarian Universalist Chaplain; Idrisa Pandit, Muslim advisor; Vincent Poirier, Catholic chaplain; Karin Tanenholtz, Unitarian Universalist chaplain; Neelima Shukla-Bhatt, Hindu advisor; Patricia Walton, Protestant Christian chaplain. The student members of the multi-council from 1993–1999 include:

Baha’i: Goly Anvary, Nahz Anvary, Seema Anvary, Crissy Caceres, Colby Lenz, Risa Robinson, Elizabeth Walker

Buddhist: Antonia Bennett, Maura Ginty, Thuy Le, Suzanne Negoro, Bergen Nelson, Mabel Tso

Christian: Therese Anne Collette, Elizabeth Cote, Gwen Davis, Anna Hubbard, Amanda Freeman, Margaret Kowalsky, Jamie Levine, Stephanie Pierce, Kim Priori, Larissa Ranbom, Karin Rollins, Vera Tranlong, Heather Ure, Desiree Urquhart, Shannon Wright

Hindu: Anindita Basu, Renu Bazaz, Varsha Giridharan, Meghanna Hate, Rachana Khandelwal, Shreyasi Lahiri, Viji Natarajan, Supriya Patodia, Nidhi Singh, Priya Talwar

Jain: Kunjal Chaudhari, Lisa Shah

Jewish: Joanna Arch, Tara Feinberg, Stacie Garnett, Jackie Gran, Molly Kaplowitz, Stacey Palestrant, Carolyn Rabin, Lili Schwan-Rosenwald

Muslim: Anjum Ali, Nasrin Al-Dawoodi, Syeachia Dennis, Hina Ghory, Yasmeen Golzar, Asma Hasan, Samar Suehela Fatima Muzaffar, Sophia Queshri, Nadiyah Sayeed, Zeba Siddiqui, Manar Waheed

Native American: Risa Robinson

Sikh: Gagen Khera, Sat Katar Khalsa, Simran Malik

Taoist: Mabel Tso

Wiccan: Christine Brown, Kerry Masteller, Sarah Whedon

Unitarian Universalist: Allaire Diamond, Rachel Johnson, Jennifer Kiest, Eleanor Klieber, Linda Legeyt, Lisa Scanlon

Zoroastrian: Shaan Kandawalla, Rashna Mehta, Tanaz Petigara

ENDNOTES

1. The dialogue portions which appear in this essay are taken from the Beyond Tolerance Workshop which was written by the members of the student Multi-faith Council at Wellesley College (listed above).
2. The “Code of Conduct for Religious Organizations” at Wellesley College explains the responsibilities of religious groups active on the Wellesley College Campus. It can be accessed through the programs web page at www.Wellesley.edu/RelLife
3. Vincent Harding, “Concluding Remarks” National Gathering: EDUCATION as *Transformation*, Wellesley College, Wellesley, Ma., 1998