

# TIA News & Notes

August, 2005

The Newsletter of the Tulsa Interfaith Alliance

Volume 10, Issue 4

## CAN WE TALK?

Is it becoming more difficult for us to talk to, let alone hear, one another? And, what role does religious faith play in either furthering or hindering healthy public discourse? It is hard to name any hot-button issue—whether, for example, abortion, stem-cell research or gay rights—without mentioning religion. And, overshadowing these national debates is the present global conflict that implicates Judaism, Christianity and Islam.

In a recent issue of *Cross Currents* Shaul Magid asks whether we are becoming more violent as we become more religious, or is it the case that as we become more violent, we are becoming more religious? These are questions the interfaith community cannot avoid, if we take seriously our commitment to furthering interfaith dialogue.

In that same issue of *Cross Currents* the author suggests as a resource for our time the work of Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel. Writing about the second World War Heschel notes: “The conscience of the world was destroyed by those who were wont to blame others rather than ourselves.” This is a remarkable statement from someone who lost family members in the Holocaust: that we should examine ourselves before making judgments about others and that innocence should not be presumed. Heschel went on to say that war serves the human inclination to avoid responsibility and that “tanks and guns cannot redeem humanity.”

This issue of our newsletter is dedicated to furthering interfaith dialogue and healthy public debate about issues that matter to us all. This is what it means to be responsible, to pay attention to the other and risk being transformed by the encounter. To that end I am reprinting Sister Ellie Finlay’s sermon in which she speaks of her own transformation in hearing a Muslim’s prayer.

The other major piece in this newsletter is the announcement of Ms. Stephanie Saldana’s return to our community. Those of us who heard her last year were deeply moved by her experience of interfaith work. She has traveled extensively in the Middle East, worked with Diana Eck in the Pluralism Project at Harvard University, and is currently completing a year of Fulbright study in Damascus, Syria. Her experience this past year has involved living in a Catholic monastery, studying under leading Muslim scholars and teaching Christianity to Muslim girls. May we be encouraged by her presence and the work of others in developing friendships across the lines that so often divide us.

--Russ

## WITNESSING TRANSFIGURATION

### Or, “the Day I Became a Muslim”

*(The following sermon was preached by Sister Ellie Finlay at Fellowship Congregational Church, Tulsa, on July 31, 2005. Sister Ellie’s text was Matthew 17:1-9, the story of the Transfiguration, the reading for August 6<sup>th</sup> in the Episcopal Lectionary. This year it was the 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the first use of nuclear weapons, the dropping of the atomic bomb on the city of Hiroshima. The relation of the text to that fateful day she comments on as an introduction, not printed here. Sister Ellie is director of St. John’s Center for Spiritual Formation at 5840 S. Memorial, Suite 305. She is also solitary-in-residence for the Episcopal Diocese of Oklahoma—Ed)*

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“And he was transfigured before them,  
and his face shone like the sun,  
and his clothes became dazzling white.”

When we witness transfiguration nothing is fundamentally changed but everything seems different. We see through the illusion of ordinary experience. We see things as they really are. Most people, I’m convinced, if they think about it, can remember having witnessed transfiguration – can remember the dazzlement of glory breaking through the mundane, irresistibly nudging aside the commonplace which clouds our vision most of the time.

Some of you know that I lived and worked in South Africa before I came to Tulsa. And I was there at the most exciting and potentially dangerous time possible. This was during the time leading up to the first free elections as well as the period right after the new government came to power. We did not really expect a peaceful transition. We thought there could well be a bloodbath and, in fact, it was widely proclaimed a miracle that we did not experience a blood bath.

And so, I expected my life to be in danger when I moved there. But it seemed likely to me that if my life were threatened during my time in South Africa that it would be from violence. What I did not expect was illness. As it happened, I had three serious life threatening illnesses while I was there. And I want to tell you about the first of those experiences this morning.

Not long after I got to Cape Town, I became very ill with salmonella – food poisoning. I thought it was just a bad case of the flu but after two full days of pure misery, I realized I was probably dangerously sick. It was about three o’clock in the morning when I got really frightened -- and there was no phone in my hermitage. Too weak by that time to walk, I dragged myself to an open office in the same building and phoned for help.

When I finally got to the hospital, I was in serious trouble. The emergency people brought a wheelchair to the car and I was taken in to wait for admission. And there, in my semi-conscious misery, I got really scared. I have never seen a filthier medical facility in my life. There was broken glass on the floor. And used, bloody bandages strewn about. “If I survive this, I may leave here with something worse than what brought me in,” I remember thinking. My rescuer, not knowing whether I had any money, had taken me to the one public hospital which would accept uninsured patients. Not all South African hospitals, I later learned, were so revolting.

Well, they got me stabilized and put me in the casualty ward. I suppose there were about twenty patients in that large room. All sorts and conditions of suffering humanity were represented in those beds. Several gun shot and stabbing victims came in. A burned baby screamed and screamed and screamed. A brain-damaged man paced up and down raving incoherently – a regular, I later found out. Asthma patients in respiratory crisis. More drug overdoses than I could count. It was a ghastly situation from every point of view. The nurses were busy and unpleasant, the doctors perfunctory. I was alone. In a strange country. Very sick. And very frightened.

By the next day, I was out of danger but still too sick to be moved. And then – the old man was brought in. My bed – really a gurney – was wheeled to one side. The nurse explained that I was blocking the oxygen equipment they urgently needed for the new patient. He was very old and clearly dying. A huge group of people accompanied him – dark skinned but not African.

The women wore long baggy dresses and scarves on their heads. “Muslims,” I concluded. “Indian, maybe?”

The medical people did what they could. They hooked the old man up to their various machines, inserted their various tubes, got him as comfortable as possible, I guessed, and then finally moved aside. One by one, each member of the family approached the bed to say good-bye.

Finally a young woman came to the side of the bed closest to me. I could have touched her if I’d been strong enough to move. She was weeping and carried a tiny book which she held tightly in both her hands. And then she leaned over the old man – whose breathing was horribly labored and rasping by this time – and she started to chant. Very gently, very beautifully. She held the book, glancing at it from time to time, rocking forward over the bed and sang – ever so softly, perfectly, magically. “It must be Arabic,” I reasoned. I’d never heard it so close – or chanted by a woman. Slowly the words, their literal meaning unknown to me, began to sink into my consciousness like a mental balm. I was cradled and caressed by the wonder of that healing loveliness. A strange happiness descended over me – so rich, so unexpected I thought my heart would burst. And I prayed. For the old man. For the girl. Mostly just a wordless thanksgiving.

Finally she stopped. I opened my eyes and saw the back of her veiled head moving away and, losing all inhibition, called out, “Miss?” She heard me and turned – a question in her eyes. I didn’t know what to say to her but I couldn’t bear for her to leave without saying something.

“Is that your father?”

The tears welled up in her eyes and she said, “My uncle.”

“You love him very much,” I offered.

“Yes,” she nodded.

Then, needing somehow to thank her but feeling very lame I said, “What you sang... It was very beautiful.”

And that’s when it happened. Her face took on a luminosity that would have startled me had it not been accompanied by an expression of deep interest and concern. “You. You are so, so sick,” she said. She seemed to forget her dying uncle and

gave me her entire attention. (I was embarrassed. I did not want her being concerned for me.) “It was the Qur’an.” She lowered her head in reverence. “It was prayer.” Dignity and strength and a certain power surrounded this woman as she spoke to me. No longer conveying the demeanor of a doting, grieving, favorite niece – here was a prophet, a witness to the mercy of God. She leaned forward, her eyes utterly focused on mine. “I prayed the prayers for you, too.”

I was utterly stunned and also exhausted by the effort of speaking. All I could do was whisper “thank you” over and over while she smiled at me again and then finally moved away. Truly a lover of God. I had touched a great holiness and I knew it. My own suffering suspended by the blessing, I slept – long and wonderfully.

The old man died. I lived. I never saw my young benefactor again and I never learned her name. But I saw transfiguration that day. The glory of the one God – the compassionate, the merciful – poured from the brilliantly illuminated face of a woman in love with her God. And I bless the sickness that took me to that hospital and I bless the broken glass and the filthy floors and everything else about the whole experience because it is all transfigured – then and now. Every little detail.

That was the day I became a Muslim. And there was a day in my life when I became a Jew as well. Perhaps I will tell you about that one day. And there was another day when I became a Buddhist and another when I became a Wiccan and another when I became a Hindu. For every person of faith whose faith leads to inclusion and openness is truly my sister, truly my brother. And I have discovered that when we approach the belief system of our heritage or our choice as a vehicle for transformation, for transfiguration, we find that we are all more alike than we are different.

Yes, I saw transfiguration that day in that dreadful hospital in Cape Town. Oh, I wish I did that more; I wish I were able to see through the illusion in order to witness the glory! No, I haven’t reached that exalted goal – but I believe in it. Oh yes. “Beloved, I do not consider that I have made it my own, but this one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal...”

## LET'S GET THIS SIGNED

Dear Friends,

I am writing with an update on “The Clergy Letter Project,” our effort to secure the signatures of 10,000 members of the Christian Clergy on an open letter affirming the complementary relationship between religion and science. First, let me thank you for signing this letter. Your signatures will demonstrate to the broader community that, despite what many are saying, religion and science need not be at odds with one another.

With President Bush saying just last week that students should be taught creationism and intelligent design along with evolution, our work is far from over. Similarly, with a September trial pending in Dover, Pennsylvania on the Dover school board’s stance on intelligent design, the issue is likely to again gather a great deal of media attention soon. I hope we are able to reach our goal of 10,000 signatures by the end of September so our letter is well positioned to make as large a political impact as possible.

To accomplish this, I need your help. Although the response to date has been fabulous, already approaching 6,000 signatures, we need to gather signatures faster. I know that many of you have forwarded the letter to friends and colleagues already and I am both deeply grateful for that and somewhat hesitant to ask for more help. But I will do so, nonetheless. If each of you were to find just one colleague who is willing to sign the letter, we would exceed our goal in no time. Just one colleague! Please send the letter to at least one friend today. People are much more likely to sign on if they hear about the letter from someone they know rather than from a stranger.

**“Religion and Science: The New Challenge”** is a lecture to be given by Dr. George Ellis, Professor of Cosmology at the University of South Africa, Tuesday night, **October 4<sup>th</sup> at 7:00 p.m.** The lecture will be given in the newly refurbished McDonald-Reynolds Auditorium on the University of Oklahoma campus. Dr. Ellis is the recipient of the Templeton Prize for Excellence in Science and Religion. The lecture is the major event for the Religious Studies program at OU.

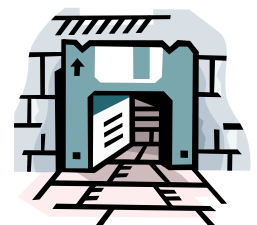
As we close in on our goal of 10,000 signatures, I would like to update you on the media campaign we will soon undertake. We have been very fortunate that one of the country’s largest communication firms has taken an interest in our project and will help us publicize our efforts. I am thrilled to say that I will be working with Jeremy Ben-Ami of Fenton Communications to accomplish this critical task. Having been President Clinton’s deputy domestic policy advisor and the policy advisor for Governor Howard Dean’s presidential campaign, Mr. Ben-Ami is both media savvy and well connected to accomplish a great deal. I will keep you posted as we enter that phase of the campaign.

But now, please help us reach our goal of 10,000 signatures. The letter can be accessed on the web at: [http://www.uwosh.edu/colleges/cols/religion\\_science\\_collaboration.htm](http://www.uwosh.edu/colleges/cols/religion_science_collaboration.htm) . (Copy of letter on next page.) We've added a count of signatures by state (recognizing that we need to average 200 per state!). Again, if each of you found just one friend to sign on, we'd be ready to enter the public relations phase of the campaign.

Thanks so very much for all you've done and for what you might still be willing to do.

Michael

Michael Zimmerman  
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## **An Open Letter Concerning Religion and Science**

Within the community of Christian believers there are areas of dispute and disagreement, including the proper way to interpret Holy Scripture. While virtually all Christians take the Bible seriously and hold it to be authoritative in matters of faith and practice, the overwhelming majority do not read the Bible literally, as they would a science textbook. Many of the beloved stories found in the Bible - the Creation, Adam and Eve, Noah and the ark - convey timeless truths about God, human beings, and the proper relationship between Creator and creation expressed in the only form capable of transmitting these truths from generation to generation. Religious truth is of a different order from scientific truth. Its purpose is not to convey scientific information but to transform hearts.

We the undersigned, Christian clergy from many different traditions, believe that the timeless truths of the Bible and the discoveries of modern science may comfortably coexist. We believe that the theory of evolution is a foundational scientific truth, one that has stood up to rigorous scrutiny and upon which much of human knowledge and achievement rests. To reject this truth or to treat it as one theory among others is to deliberately embrace scientific ignorance and transmit such ignorance to our children. We believe that among God's good gifts are human minds capable of critical thought and that the failure to fully employ this gift is a rejection of the will of our Creator. To argue that God's loving plan of salvation for humanity precludes the full employment of the God-given faculty of reason is to attempt to limit God, an act of hubris. We urge school board members to preserve the integrity of the science curriculum by affirming the teaching of the theory of evolution as a core component of human knowledge. We ask that science remain science and that religion remain religion, two very different, but complementary, forms of truth.

To view the list of thousands of religious leaders who have signed this letter already, please go to: [http://www.uwosh.edu/colleges/cols/religion\\_science\\_collaboration.htm](http://www.uwosh.edu/colleges/cols/religion_science_collaboration.htm). If you would like to sign this letter, please send an e-mail to [mz@uwosh.edu](mailto:mz@uwosh.edu) listing:

Your Title and Name  
Affiliation/Church (optional)  
City and State

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## **More on the Evolution Wars**

In an interview with Texas reporters Monday, August 1, President Bush said that "intelligent design" should be taught in public schools along with the scientifically-established theory of evolution.

While theories called creationism, scientific creationism, creation science, or intelligent design are not all the same, each is based on beliefs about divine creation, which is a matter of faith not of science. In America, the most religiously diverse nation in the world, every religion, tradition, or individual has the right to teach their own creation beliefs. Even within Judaism and Christianity there are many differing interpretations and opinions about the creation story in the Book of Genesis.

But the U.S. Constitution prohibits governmental bodies from favoring one religion over others or religion in general over no religion.

As the courts have ruled many times, belief in divine creation is a matter of faith, not of scientifically observable phenomena. The Interfaith Alliance believes that the appropriate environment for teaching and learning matters of faith is in homes or houses of worship, not in publicly-funded science classrooms.

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## BULLETIN BOARD

### **There will be a candle light vigil September 10<sup>th</sup> in the University of Tulsa neighborhood.**

The public is invited to gather at College Hill Presbyterian Church, 700 S. Columbia by 8:00 p.m. With the theme, "Steps Toward a Community United Against Terrorism," all will walk toward the mosque on the University of Tulsa campus, 3020 E. 4<sup>th</sup> Place.

Walk organizers are planning five stops along the route. At each stop four speakers from various religious and community perspectives will speak. At the last stop there will be a minute of silence to consider the loss to humanity by the lives that have been taken by terrorists and violence through the ages. The event will close with refreshments and opportunity to make new friends.

Among organizers and sponsors are OCCJ, College Hill Presbyterian Church, Fellowship Congregational Church, Pastors for Peace, United Campus Ministries, the Presbyterian Peacemaking Committee of the Eastern Oklahoma Presbytery, the Tulsa Indian Coalition Against Racism, the Islamic Society of Tulsa and the Muslim Student Association.

**Hiroshima and Nagasaki: 60 Years Later:** an exhibit organized by the Eastern Oklahoma Pax Christi Community, debuted at St. Benedict Roman Catholic Church, August 7<sup>th</sup>. The exhibit is a series of 30 posters from the Hiroshima Peace Memorial Museum in Japan. It is a moving presentation, reminding us of the devastating effects of nuclear weapons. An excellent educational display for schools and faith communities, it is available from John Kennington of Pax Christi, 809-6325 or [johnkennington@cox.net](mailto:johnkennington@cox.net).

Another resource is **The Last Best Chance**, a 45 minute movie starring Fred Thompson with an epilogue moderated by Tom Brokaw. This docudrama shows the threat posed by vulnerable nuclear weapons and materials around the world. A free copy is available from the WAND Fund. Call 781-643-6740 or e-mail [edfund@wand.org](mailto:edfund@wand.org).

**"Women of the Book: A Jerusalem Collage"** records the experiences of a women's dialogue group, consisting of Israeli and Palestinian Jews, Christians and Muslims, including honest reflec-

tions on dilemmas raised by living in a situation of ongoing violence. The book is published by the Interreligious Coordinating Council of Israel and may be purchased by contacting Sarah Bernstein at [promgrams@icci.org.il](mailto:promgrams@icci.org.il)

**"Call for Justice" Weekend** is sponsored by the Unitarian Universalist Service Committee, which invites people of faith to join them in Washington D.C., September 24-26. Focused on an effort to help end U.S. involvement in torture, the weekend of workshops and activities aims to educate the public and government leadership about the grim realities of current U.S. practices. For more information call 800-388-3920, visit [www.uusc.org/stoptorture](http://www.uusc.org/stoptorture), or e-mail [stoptorture@uusc.org](mailto:stoptorture@uusc.org).

**The Issue of Criminal Justice in Oklahoma** is addressed by the Oklahoma Interfaith Council on Prison Ministry, an advisory council to the Department of Corrections. The Council consists of two arms: The Oklahoma Corrections Advisory Council on Inmate Religious Rights and Practices and the Oklahoma Advisory Council on Volunteer Programs and Services. For information about either of these two groups, or how to become involved, call Stan Basler at 405-530-2015.

**Interfaith Alliance Supports American Muslim Initiative to Combat Terrorism.** "We support the bold action of the American Muslim Society," declared Susie Armstrong, Vice-President of the Interfaith Alliance, "in support of peace and against terrorism. It is a sad truth that most if not all of the world's great religious traditions have at times been abused to rationalize acts of violence. Such violence is sparked when deeply-held religious beliefs are manipulated with the specific purpose of sowing hate and fear. We stand with all people of faith and good will who are working to put an end to terrorism. When any religion is used as an excuse for violence, all religions are debased and defiled." (National Press Club, Washington, D.C., July 25<sup>th</sup>).

**Americans United warns military officials not to promote Graham evangelistic rally.** Americans United for the Separation of Church

and State took action after learning that Bob Dees, Executive Director of the Military Ministry of Campus Crusade for Christ, had sent e-mails to installation commanders informing them of the September 9-11 "Serving God and Country" seminar in Ashville, N.C. The event is sponsored by the Billy Graham Evangelistic Association, now run by Franklin Graham. Said the Rev. Barry Lynn, Americans United Director, "The military must never favor one religion over others. . . Promoting this Christian event to the military could convey an unconstitutional message of governmental endorsement of religion." Men and women serving and dying in our armed forces are of all faiths or no faith at all, but they are all Americans.

### **Celebrate Diversity- -Stop the Hate**

October 6, 2005, 7:30 PM  
St. Paul's Cathedral NW 7<sup>th</sup> & Robinson, OKC

The Seventh Annual Celebrate Diversity- -Stop the Hate event, in conjunction with the National Stop the Hate event, will be held Thursday, October 5, 2005, at 7:30PM at St. Paul's Cathedral, NW 7<sup>th</sup> & Robinson, Oklahoma City.

We are delighted to announce our speaker this year is Stephanie Saldana, who is a graduate of Harvard Divinity School, and from 2004 to present has been working on a Fulbright Islamic Civilizations Fellowship entitled: The Muslim Jesus in Damascus.

Celebrate Diversity will be immediately followed by a candle light vigil to the Oklahoma City National Memorial one block south of the Cathedral to remember victims of hate crimes from the last year with a responsive reading. Prelude music will begin at 7PM, and music with a peace and diversity theme will be part of the program as well.

Need a speaker on issues of pluralism or interfaith understanding?  
Call Russ Bennett at 743-7375 or e-mail at [rlbennett@bigfoot.com](mailto:rlbennett@bigfoot.com)

"My heart is open to all the winds. . . Wherever God's caravans turn, the religion of love shall be my religion and my faith."

--Aribi, 13<sup>th</sup> century Sufi

### **STEPHANIE SALDANA'S ITINERARY**

September 11, Sunday:  
10:30 a.m.  
Fellowship Congregational Church, UCC  
2900 S. Harvard.  
3:00 p.m.  
Islamic Society of Tulsa,  
4620 S. Irvington.  
6:00 p.m.  
Community of Hope UCC, 2545 S. Yale.

Week of September 12 is open.

September 18, Sunday,  
Roman Catholic Diocese of Tulsa, TBA.

September 19-20,  
Phillips Theological Seminary,  
901 N. Mingo.

September 21—25,  
various venues in the Kansas City area.

September 26—October 1, San Antonio, Texas.

October 2, Sunday:  
Morning services  
Mayflower Congregational Church, OKC  
4:00 p.m.,  
Trinity Episcopal Church,  
Tulsa, 501 S. Cincinnati.

October 3-5 Open.

October 6  
Stop the Hate program St Paul's Cathedral,  
Oklahoma City, 7:30 p.m.

If you would like to schedule Stephanie for one of the open dates, call Janet Storts at 747-7777.

"The problem of our age is for all of us to learn to live together with our serious different traditions not only in peace but in mutual trust and loyalty."

—Wilfred Cantwell Smith

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The Interfaith Alliance is a non-partisan, grassroots organization dedicated to promoting the positive, healing role of faith in civic life and challenging intolerance and extremism.

Contributing Editor: Russell L. Bennett,  
Typing and Layout: Janet Storts.

**Tulsa Interfaith Alliance web site is up to date.**

Thank you, Bill Griffin, for your work.  
Bill is our new web master. Check us out at  
[www.tulsainterfaith.org](http://www.tulsainterfaith.org).

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