Why Interfaith?

“A big part of what the 21st century will be about is whether religion is a bubble of isolation, a barrier of division, a bomb of destruction, or a bridge of cooperation. Lots of leaders have been pushing for the bubble, the barrier and the bomb. I think now you’re starting to see a critical mass of participants and leaders building bridges.”

- Eboo Patel, Founder and President
  Interfaith Youth Core

For years now we’ve been trying to articulate and cultivate an Interfaith approach to Religious and Spiritual Life at Gettysburg College. Why?

Apart from convictions that this is the right thing to do, that this is what a truly comprehensive religious and spiritual perspective in today’s world requires, this needs to be done because families are rarely homogenous, because the future demographics of our nation and the globe seem to indicate that without deeper understanding of the religious, spiritual and cultural values of our own family members and neighbors we doom ourselves, our communities and our nation to siloed constructions about reality. And siloed constructions feed racism, sexism, anti-Semitism, homophobia and war.

We ignore religious and spiritual life to our peril – no one can truly be a well-educated liberal arts graduate without the ability to read with nuance the articles, press clippings and blogs, etc., that blast our stratospheres moment by moment. Understanding both context and content means knowing what motivates people and why. Empathic listening to voices other than our own, grasping their intelligibility and meaning- as people describe reality in their own terms – means daring to risk moving away from self-centeredness, being brave enough to be compassionate.
The Interfaith network today is aimed at helping students engage all aspects of their identities by creating a campus climate that promotes cooperation across religious, spiritual, cultural and geographical difference. Students at Gettysburg College often relate that they feel that this campus is not a safe place to admit that one engages in religious life and practice. Students who dare to counter negative religious stereotypes also tell me that they feel their practice of religious life is undermined. This is true across a spectrum of spiritual traditions. *I do understand, by the way, that for many freedom means being allowed to have no-religious expression or practice.* Such feelings have been articulated not only by Christians – Catholic and Protestant, but by Jews and students who come from faith traditions not usually thought about in South Central Pennsylvania – Hindu, Islam, Buddhist, etc.

So, I ask – what would a well-educated liberal arts student – what would a Gettysburg graduate need to know in order to engage in a nuanced reading of today’s New York Times or Washington Post? Devoid of religious – spiritual understanding, devoid of knowledge of the world’s great religious traditions is it possible to truly understand global matters, health concerns, gender rights, racial tension or politics? I think not.

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As the body cannot live without food, so the soul cannot live without meaning. _Viktor Frankl_