

Accepting differentness

‘How in God’s name do we talk to one another?’

by Lynn Woike, *Editor*
and Alan Maislen, *Correspondent*

It had been a difficult week. Pipe bombs were mailed to 12 well-known people who had been critical of the president; hate was spewed about the migrant caravan moving through Mexico; the brutal execution of Jamal Khashoggi, a U.S. resident, Saudi journalist and a columnist with the Washington Post was still in the news; the Trump administration moved to define transgender individuals out of existence; a white nationalist tried to enter a black church, was rebuffed, went into a nearby supermarket and murdered two African-American shoppers; and then 11 people were gunned down at the Tree of Life synagogue in Pittsburgh.

Across the country, people were deeply grieving as levels of anxiety, fear and depression rose.

“Our country has never been more divided – even within our own families,” said Mike Smoolca, a founding member of the Farmington Valley League of Light, a new, multi-faith group created to strengthen ties in the community.

The League was created to “embody and promote unity – not uniformity,” and that our differences are “necessary and enriching,” he said.

To help people get past the fear of those who are “different,” the league organized a program featuring spiritual leaders from three faiths to offer new ways of talking about the issues that separate individuals.

Held at Our Lady of Calvary Retreat Center in Farmington October 28, “Embracing the Other: Let’s Talk about Difference and Connection” was co-sponsored by B’nai Tikvoh-Sholom/Neshama Center for Lifelong Learning, the Farmington Valley American Muslim Center and the retreat center.

“We can’t let differences come between us,” Smoolca said.

About 150 people of all faiths attended the event, including Rep. Beth Bye and a contingent from Watkinson School.

“The League of Light was thrilled by the diversity of the community that actively participated. People represent-

ing all the Abrahamic faiths, other faith traditions and even those with no particular faith attended. We welcomed folks from various racial and ethnic communities. This group of ‘others’ joined together seeking spiritual wisdom and to gain insights of the practical method of Contemplative Dialogue [see sidebar] in order to learn how to cope with and overcome the divisiveness in today’s world,” Smoolca said.

Rabbi responds to hate

Rabbi Debra Cantor of B’nai Tikvoh-Sholom in Bloomfield, who also serves on the League of Light steering committee, said when planning was going on six months ago, October 28 was a random date chosen for the event.

“Yet it turned out if I had to be anywhere the day after this horrible, horrible thing happened, this is where we all needed to be. We needed to be in a place where we’re standing up against hate. When somebody spews hate about Muslims or LGBTQ people or immigrants or about Jews, we will not be divided. We simply won’t accept it.”

She acknowledged, “We have to figure out ways to talk to one another about hot-button issues where we have different, deeply held values that clash.”

Part of the reason for the event was to learn to talk to people about important things when you disagree.

“You don’t demonize other people. You listen to them. You listen for the values that they’re articulating and you recognize that those are legitimate values, as you have legitimate values you’re basing your opinion on. Then you recognize it’s a matter of competing values. It’s not one of you is good and one of you is evil. It’s a matter of competing values and we can talk about competing values.

“On the other hand,” Cantor said, “if someone is talking about racism or sexism or anti-Semitism or Islamophobia... there is no middle ground. ... I’m not interested in figuring out how we can have civil discourse about hate. ... No! No! It’s not about finding middle ground with



Deacon Art Miller, Rabbi Debra Cantor and Imam Safwan Shaikh spoke to a diverse gathering of about 150 people.

Courtesy photo

somebody who believes that some people are not created in the image of God, that some people are subhuman. When we’re talking about hate and prejudice, there’s no middle ground. There’s no defending Neo-Nazism or white supremacy.”

Pittsburgh changes the conversation

The opening remarks she gave were not the ones she’d planned – those were discarded after the attack that killed 11 and injured seven.

“I know rabbis at that synagogue,” Cantor said, noting that at the time Jews in a sister congregation were being massacred, they were reading the same portions of the Torah as was she. It was the story of Abraham welcoming strangers into his tent.

The reason Robert Bowers chose that synagogue, she said, is because it supports immigrants and refugees.

“That synagogue participated last week in National Refugee Shabbat and their name was listed on the website of a venerable Jewish organization called HIAS, originally founded to help Jewish refugees escape pogroms in Russia; they then helped Jews escape Germany and other places. Now, they are a Jewish organization that helps other refugees and immigrants here at our borders and around the world. The synagogue in Pittsburgh was on a list on the HIAS website.

“My synagogue is also on that list. My synagogue also participated in National Refugee Shabbat.”

Since the Muslim ban began in January 2016, Cantor said her synagogue has prominently displayed a banner proclaiming, “Our people were refugees, too.”

“I do not want to take down our banner, but I will admit that I am scared. We have spoken with our local police. We will lock our doors during worship. We will have to be on our guard,” she said. “This is the atmosphere we’re living in. The constant hate and visceral that gets spewed on a daily basis; it’s all very connected.”

Defining white privilege

Deacon Art Miller of Saint Mary’s Church in Simsbury had a question for the community: “What if the shooter had been a Muslim? What if the shooter had been black? What if he had been an undocumented worker? How would we have reacted?”

All Muslims, blacks and undocumented citizens worry about getting condemned if the shooter were one of them.

“They’d be tagged with it; they’d be on the defensive. White people didn’t have to worry if he were white – and that’s white privilege,” he said.

Miller cited the parable of the Good Samaritan in which a priest on the dangerous road to Jericho ignored an injured man because he had other business to attend to. A Levite didn’t help the man because he would not touch someone who was impure. Only the outcast Samaritan took the injured man to the inn, promising to pay for his care.

“Jesus’ point was who really loved his neighbor?”

When someone comes to dinner with prejudiced views, Miller said, “Don’t let hate come into your house. Say, ‘I don’t want to hear that, and if you continue, I’ll leave the table.’”

Don’t be afraid of your truth, he told attendees.



Courtesy photo

A group of Watkinson School students attended the event.

Impact on Muslim communities

When Imam Safwan Shaikh asked the children he was teaching at the Farmington Valley American Muslim Center what they were called at school, he said they answered, “terrorists” but that it was done jokingly.

“It has become such a part of their reality, it doesn’t faze them anymore,” he said.

He spoke about a mosque in Houston, where antagonists walk just outside the property limits with AR15s.

“The congregants know them, and it doesn’t faze them. It’s become normalized,” Shaikh said.

Speaking about the importance of embracing the “other,” Shaikh said,

“you don’t really know black unless you know white. I don’t know who I am unless contrasted with someone else. But the more different we are, the more opportunities we have to love one another.”

Muslims are getting more actively engaged in civic involvement, making their voices heard, being part of the process, he said.

A Muslim in the audience said he is part of a monthly get-together between Jewish and Muslim friends.

“We found that our rituals and prayers are the same – we only disagree on less than 3 percent,” he said.

The prophets challenged their own attitudes, Shaikh said, urging people to

do the same by asking, “Why do I think the way I do?”

Unified, not divided

All speakers noted that families are divided, but it has always been that way.

In Houston, Sunni and Shia worshipped together in the same mosque although arguments have existed between them for more than a thousand years, Shaikh said.

Miller noted that before Martin Luther rejected teachings of the Roman Catholic Church in the 1500s, triggering the Protestant Reformation, there was only one religion, and today there are 49,000 Christian denominations.

“We don’t worship separate Gods,” Cantor said.

“We have gathered here today to connect with one another, to declare that we will not allow our faith to be perverted into a tool of hate. As the late, great teacher of Torah and friend of Dr. Martin Luther King, once said, “This is no time for neutrality. We ... cannot remain aloof or indifferent. We, too, are either ministers of the sacred or slaves of evil.” **VL**


Learn more about the Farmington Valley League of Light at fvlleagueoflight.weebly.com.

Listening as a sacred act

“Contemplative Dialogue,” a workshop at the event led by Mike Smoolca and Paul Uccello, offered techniques to discuss differences without anger, acrimony or intimidation.

Its four key steps are:

1. Become self-aware of how you make meaning and form opinions.
2. Engage with the intent to understand and connect, not try to win them over to your point of view or simply avoid conflict. You are not seeking resolution, only connection.
3. Be open and non-judgmental. Respect, but not condone, the opinions of others. Ask, “How did you arrive at that point of view?” Seek clarity and deeper understanding. Know your view is valid for you, but may not be valid for others.”
4. Be mindful of emotional reactions, yours and those to whom you are speaking.



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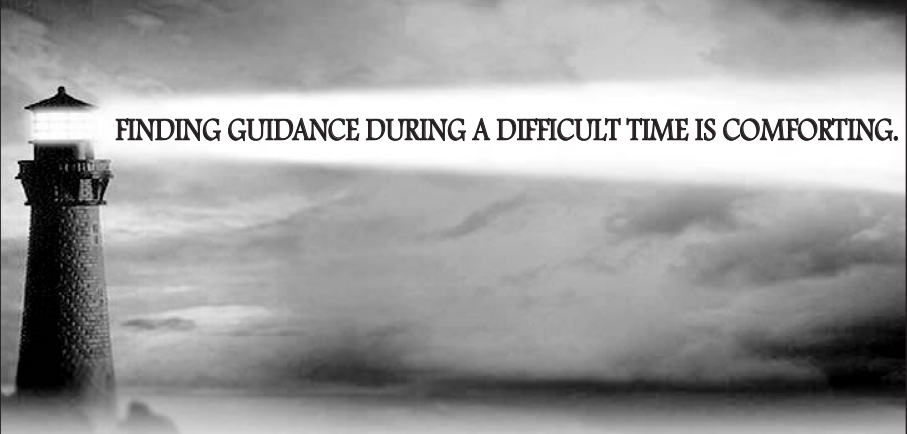
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