

I know a metaphor when I see one

Joan Chittister | Dec. 1, 2006 From Where I Stand

The movie "Everest," now showing at the local IMAX theater, sent chills down my spine. There, in the middle of the Himalayas, a group of climbers found themselves blocked on their way to the summit by a fracture in the snow 90 feet deep. The crevasse was too wide to jump, but at the same time too narrow to simply accept as the end of their 30,000-foot attempt to conquer the highest mountain in the world. So they opened up a telescoped pole ladder, laid it across the icy ravine and in large, clunky, steel-clawed boots walked across the open spaces between its rungs, toes on one rundle, heels on the other.

I know a metaphor when I see one. I felt like I had just been part of a similar climb myself, sure of the need to go on, not sure that the passage was safe.

In Lebanon the week before, spiritual leaders from every side of the religious crevasse -- Hindu, Buddhist, Muslim, and Orthodox -- met in the first-ever Middle East-Asian Spiritual Dialogue to discuss the role of religion and the road to peace. They were sheikhs and monks and archbishops and patriarchs and judges and theologians.

They were leaders of religious groups who had long been at odds with one another. And they were now trying to take the first steps across the historical fissures that were keeping them from uniting a globe where borders were fast disappearing, where cultures were all becoming polyglot, where no one was safe from having to deal with the others any more.

No doubt about it: This was not one more routine academic convention.

This meeting was happening in a city where the marks of bombs were frighteningly fresh. Bridges were still out in the center of the city. Makeshift steel beams creak and groan under the traffic they carry from one side of the overpass to the other. One whole section of the city lies in rubble. The apartment buildings that remain standing are hung with canvass. Why? Because families with nowhere else to go have crept back into the condemned buildings and live their still. The sheets of canvas cover the gaping holes left by the missiles and keep out the cold and rain from the children who peek around the corners of the scars.

This was a meeting where the participants, religious figures all, spoke across the great divides of time and tradition, of place and peoples, to heal the wounds of division and prejudice that threaten the very globe again. They shared their spiritual traditions with one another. They got to know one another. They defined their moral values. They talked about the sacredness of life and the need for compassion. They talked about how they saw God, how they prayed, what they knew to be the purpose of life.

Where I grew up, something like that was impossible. Catholics hardly spoke to Protestants; Protestants barred Catholics from public life, never mind Hindus or Buddhists, Muslims or Orthodox.

But the problem is that even now, even here in the United States, we still do far too little to bridge our own divides while those very differences are being exploited everywhere. Here imams cannot board a plane without being eyed with suspicion, and children cannot carry stuffed toys on board without being screened and searched and half undressed at checkpoints. Muslims are changing their names in order to get jobs and we, too, are building barbed-wired walls on our border.

Instead of launching great spiritual conferences and study groups and social projects together so that we can come to understand and respect one another's spiritual beauty, we are strengthening the walls of our own spiritual ghettos.

For our part, we are worrying about stamping out feminine images of a God already called rock, tree, light, fire and dove. But this God, the very womb of the universe, must never ever be called "mother" in the hymns of the church.

We are worrying about keeping the gay community invisible, warning them not to talk about their sexual identity in their parishes, reaching out to them in one sentence, explaining their theological disorders to them in another.

We are tidying up our rituals and reclaiming our "identity" while "identity" -- if we mean the old WASP paradigm or White, Anglo-Saxon, Protestant USA -- gets more mulatto, more Eastern, more "other" every day.

This conference, under the auspices of His Holiness Aram I, Catholicos of Cilicia of the Armenian Apostolic Church and the Most Venerable Master Sheng Yen, founder of Dharma Drum Mountain in Taiwan, called for a great deal more. As Master Sheng Yen put it, we must "focus on the shared needs of humankind as a whole. ? We must find a common path that reflects a set of global ethics which transcends religion, ethnicity and culture."

Let's put it this way: Bombs and bullets are not doing it. The world is more dangerous now than when we invaded Iraq. Iraq itself is worse off now than it was when we first went there. The Middle East is less stable now than it was before we sent all our weapons in to stabilize it. And we ourselves are poorer for it: Poorer in international relations. Poorer in social development here. Poorer in moral stature around the world.

From where I stand, it seems to me that it's time for all of us to put a pole ladder over the fissures we have created between us and the rest of the world and start walking. Awkward as we are. Dangerous as it is. Unsure as we may be. There is no other way to get to the other side now because there is no "other side."

We are all in this one together and we are surely too close to the summit now to quit.

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