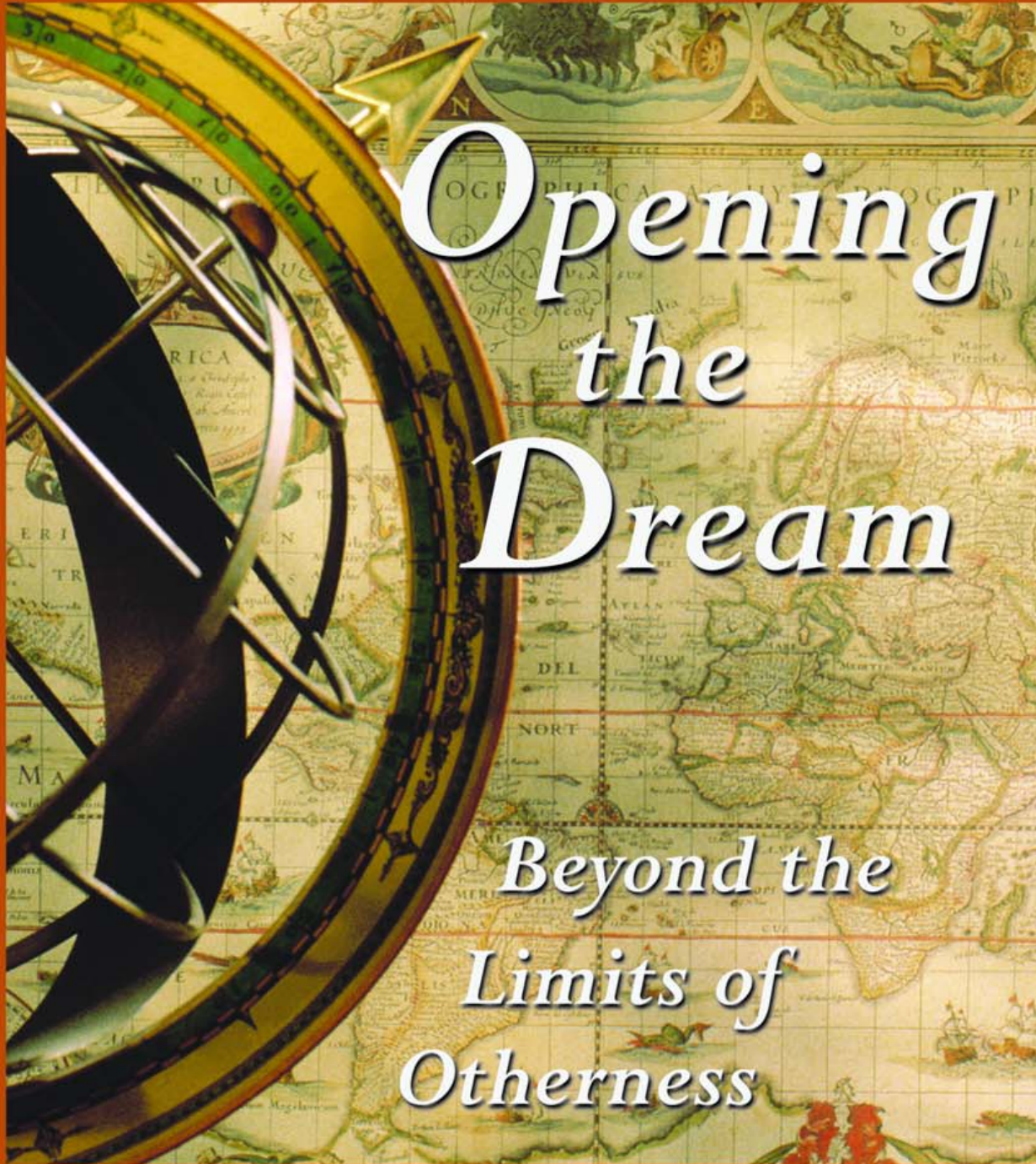


Charles Gibbs



Essays on Deepening the American Dream

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OPENING THE DREAM

BEYOND THE LIMITS OF OTHERNESS

Charles Gibbs

A Citizen of the Earth

THE CONVERSATION really began when I asked where he was from. We were speeding down Broadway, deserted at 4:30 in the morning, on the way to John F. Kennedy International Airport. I was headed home and wondered where his home was originally. Through the opening in the barrier that separates passenger from driver in a yellow cab in New York City, he answered my question with a question: “Where do you think?”

Though I work with people from all over the world and have a good ear for accents (like recognizing the Iranian accent of the man who runs the Mexican restaurant just down from the Jewish Community Center in San Rafael), I offered a guess: “The Middle East?”

“Pakistan,” he replied.

“I have many friends in Pakistan,” I responded.

Soon I knew the broad contours of his life. He had recently lost the sales job he had held for several years. Driving a cab was a stopgap measure to help him survive until the economy turned around. It wasn’t all bad, he realized. He could take a three-month vacation to be with his family—a wife, a daughter, and two sons—in Pakistan. Yes, he missed them, but he could find work here to support them. And it was easier for them as Muslims to live in Pakistan.

As I talked with him about my work of global interfaith cooperation, which often had me traveling and away from my family, he voiced his support of this effort to bring people of different faiths together to work for the well-being of all. Then he shared an insight. “Since I was a child,” he offered, “I’ve felt that more than a Pakistani, I was ultimately a citizen of the Earth. And more than a Muslim, I was ultimately a child of God.”

As I listened to him, I knew that I had often said the same thing, replacing *Pakistani* with *American* and *Muslim* with *Christian*. I began to wonder why I saw life that way. Heard life that way. I began to wonder what the world would be like if more people saw and heard life that way. Not perfect, but better. Much better.

The Sacred Music of Humanity's Yearning

I can't sing. Or rather, when I sing, people want to leave the room. But I can hear, after my fashion, the extraordinary chorus of voices that fills each moment of life with the sacred music of humanity's yearning for peace, justice, and healing. Over the past seven years, as I have served as executive director of the United Religions Initiative, I have heard this chorus singing through the people of many faiths from over sixty countries with whom I have been privileged to work. I have come to believe that the voices of all faithful people committed to peace, justice, and healing, regardless of their religion or spirituality, are music to God's ears, are expressions of the Buddha nature that inheres in all life. I realize that this perspective may be heresy to some. To me, it simply reflects the truth of my experience—our lives are immeasurably enriched if we see the sacred diversity of life and life's diverse expressions of the sacred as a gift rather than as a threat. I believe that the positive future of life on Earth depends on our willingness to experience this diversity and to be changed; that it requires us to appreciate, respect, and honor the diverse voices of the sacred and knit them together into a chorus that reflects a shared vocation for peace, justice, and healing.

Perhaps my openness to hearing music of the sacred in the richness of human diversity and to viewing that diversity as a gift rather than as a threat began in my early years in New Mexico when the music of the English my family spoke was enriched by the music of the Spanish spoken all around us and by the loving presence of a small brown woman whom many white folks would have dismissed as somehow of less worth with the single epithet "Mexican." But that was not my experience of her. Nana helped my mother take care of my sister, Ruthie, me, and my brothers, Eric and Peter. My memories of Nana are mostly sensory memories evoked by the music of spoken Spanish, which to this day touches a deep place in my soul and enfolds me in the womb of that undying, nurturing mystery—love.

How do you explain the journey from racially dismissing a person as being of less value to embracing that person with love as a sacred sister or brother and valuing that person's well-being as you value your own?

The only explanation I know is being open to experiencing the other person's full humanity and to seeing the light of sacred love shining through that person. Children, before they are polluted with prejudice and blind hatred, are able to make this journey in a heartbeat. The horrors of bloodshed, fueled by fear and hatred, that plague our planet and consume younger and younger boys and girls with each passing year is a tragic testament to how easily this fatal pollution can occur and how widespread it is.

I offer one specific memory of Nana. It is tied to a picture taken when I was sixteen and had returned to New Mexico, ten years after my family had moved to Oklahoma. In the picture, a tall, gangly young white man towers over a tiny, wrinkled brown woman. Bending down slightly, he has his arm around her. Though he doesn't know it and she is too wise to say it, the picture tells a truth. They are in love, a love that embraces human difference. It sings like the birds as the sun lingers in the treetops before diving below the horizon as the edge of night sweeps across the sky clearing the way for the stars.

I didn't begin to study Spanish until a few years after graduating from college. Though learning Spanish was often hard work, it was never a struggle. The language sang in my ears and my heart long before I could speak even a little. It felt as though the more I learned, the nearer I drew to a home I didn't know I had or had ever left. My love of Spanish drew me to the writing of Gabriel García Márquez, Pablo Neruda, and many other Latin American authors in whose words I discovered worlds I didn't know existed because I had never seen them and never would have if these writers hadn't opened my eyes, my mind, my heart to experience the gift of their worlds.

Over thirty years after I first read it in translation, the opening of García Márquez's masterful novel *Cien Años de Soledad* (*One Hundred Years of Solitude*) rings in my heart: "*Muchos años después, frente al pelotón de fusilamiento, el coronel Aureliano Buendía había de recordar aquella tarde remota en que su padre lo llevó a conocer el hielo.*"¹ ("Many years later, as he faced the firing squad, Coronel Aureliano Buendía was to remember that distant afternoon when his father took him to discover ice.")² The passage continues, describing the mythic founding of the village of Macondo in a time when the world was so new that many things lacked names and so to refer to them it was necessary to point with a finger.

The first time I read this passage, I was enchanted by the freshness of the language and the wonder of a world so new. It was incomprehensibly alluring to a young college student in New York City and eventually drew

me to visit Central and South America, where I realized that these different worlds actually exist, with their own rhythm and logic. And they're different from my world, and yet the same. And sometimes language fails and it's necessary to indicate by pointing with a finger or by looking into the depth of someone's heart. Over time, I've come to see all our languages, all our theologies, all our science, all our literature as fingers pointing at what is real, as pointers to guide us into the heart of the amazing diversity and unity that is truth. Perhaps the Buddha, with his characteristic clarity, said it best: "The teaching is merely a vehicle to describe the truth. Don't mistake it for the truth itself. A finger pointing at the moon is not the moon. The finger is needed to know where to look for the moon, but if you mistake the finger for the moon itself, you will never know the real moon."³

Discovering a Deeper Humanity

Having the music and mystery of Spanish planted in my soul must have prepared me in some way to learn a different foreign language, the one that would have the greatest impact on my life. It was the language my brother, Eric, spoke. Since I was only sixteen months old when Eric was born, I was too young to remember his beginning. Too young to remember the extra thumb on his right hand or the clubbed feet that required him to be in casts for most of his first year—though this was probably when my father started to drift away from the family. I was too young to remember when the doctor diagnosed my brother as a "Mongoloid idiot" (the early clinical name for someone born with Down syndrome), informed my mother that Eric would never be anything but heartache to the family, and advised her to put him in an institution and forget about him.

The doctor was simply acting on the truth he knew. It was a medical truth. A scientific truth. He accepted the inability of modern medicine to make my brother "normal" or anything close to it. He *knew* that an abnormal life would never contribute anything of meaning to our family, our community, or the world. He also *knew* the incredible toll it would take on a family to try to raise a "Mongoloid idiot" at home. He was right about the inability of modern medicine (though that "truth" has changed dramatically in the fifty years since Eric was born) and about the toll that raising Eric at home would exact. But he was dead wrong about the rest. His scientific perspective blinded him to the deeper values that lie in the human soul.

Thank God my mother wasn't similarly blinded. Thank God she saw the value in my brother's soul and ignored the doctor's advice. If she

hadn't, we might all have missed the closest thing to a miracle—along with the birth of a child and the unfathomable power of love—we were likely to experience in this life.

Eric was a study in difference. His slanted eyes gave him an Asian look, which led most strangers to believe that his heavily accented English was a foreign language. He was given to temper tantrums long past the age of “normal” children. It wasn't easy being Eric's brother, especially when he misbehaved in public, which was often. The combination of appearance, language, and behavior made Eric as distinct as a manatee in a herd of cattle—and to many, as laughable. Many of the people we encountered in Tulsa, Oklahoma, in the late fifties weren't accustomed to such obvious difference and would often point at Eric and stare. Little children would laugh, and so, sometimes, would their parents. Decades from the humiliation and anger that this sparked in me, I'm convinced that these children and their parents didn't mean to be cruel. They were simply unable to hear in Eric's voice and to see in his face and behavior anything but an object, a laughably incomprehensible “other” who didn't fit into any of the boxes they knew. Transforming this human tendency to turn those who are different into objects is a crucial piece of humanity's curriculum in the twenty-first century.

Though he did not live to see this century, Eric became a master teacher in this curriculum. As he grew and matured, his personality shone through more and more. Like many children with Down syndrome, he loved easily and indiscriminately. He was a passionate sports fan, especially dedicated to the Dallas Cowboys and the local minor league baseball team, the Tulsa Oilers. He became an accomplished Special Olympian, winning fistfuls of medals as a swimmer.

He also demonstrated a deep sensitivity to the holy. He loved church and God. At a certain age, he rebelled at not being allowed to receive communion like the rest of his family. In those days in the Episcopal church, you had to be confirmed to receive communion. To be confirmed, you had to possess an intellectually mature faith, demonstrated by mastering a body of material that included the catechism and two creeds—an impossibly high mountain to climb for someone with a mental age of four.

But somehow Eric's weekly Sunday scowls, as Father Daniels passed by his outstretched hands without offering him the bread and wine of communion, had their impact. Overturning conventional wisdom and his own understanding of a mature faith in God, Father Daniels created an alternative confirmation instruction for Eric, in the process making a profound statement about basic human worth. Father Daniels said, in essence, that Eric, who had been ridiculed as an inconsequential other, dismissed as a

“Mongoloid idiot,” and deemed worthless by experts who *knew*, was, like everyone else, made in the image and likeness of God. Eric, like all God’s children, was infinitely precious in God’s eyes. And if in God’s eyes, then how could he not be of great worth and precious in human eyes?

In the Gospel of Matthew (13:45), Jesus shares this teaching with his followers: “Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant in search of fine pearls, who, on finding one pearl of great value, went and sold all that he had and bought it.”

In Jesus’ teaching, the pearl of great value represents not material wealth but the unfathomable beauty of the kingdom of heaven, that realm where the ultimate sovereignty of goodness and love, of peace and justice, is revealed. Where compassion reigns as the fallen are raised up and poverty is vanquished. Where all people see that they are sisters and brothers and together celebrate the preciousness of all life. And where all life is united in oneness with the Source of all life. But the pearl of great value is not only the kingdom of heaven; it is each priceless life. The challenge implicit in Jesus’ teaching is to recognize the pearl of great value when we see it and then to give ourselves fully to gain it and to manifest its beauty in the world.

When he stepped back from a lifetime of training and shattered the rules that defined the path to faith in order to welcome Eric into full fellowship in the church, Father Daniels recognized the pearl of great value in a surprising way. Both the pearl itself and the path to acquire it were named Eric. To see that, though, it was necessary to accept that a human being’s worth in God’s eyes wasn’t dependent on an arbitrary human standard of achievement, on a culturally conditioned understanding of accomplishment. It was necessary to accept that a person’s ultimate worth came from being beloved by God and that the ultimate measure of that worth was not a person’s level of education or job or income or gender or skin color or sexual orientation but how well a person manifested God’s inclusive, abiding love. By that measure, Eric and his life were indeed a pearl of great value.

Though he died with heartbreaking suddenness when he was thirty, Eric lived a life of enviable richness. The evidence abounded at his funeral. The church, of which he was a founding member, was packed, including a large contingent of Eric’s friends from Gatesway, the residential home for developmentally disabled adults where he lived. One measure of the impact of Eric’s life was the warmth and affection that greeted his friends from Gatesway. The contrast with how Eric had been viewed by others years before could not have been more dramatic or more affirming of the human capacity to open to and be transformed by the experience of difference.

Another measure came after the service as people greeted Eric's family. One by one, they spoke of how knowing Eric had changed their lives. Simply put, his infectious joy, his evident and deep faith, and his enduring ability to reach out to others had gently demolished the wall of otherness they had built between themselves and Eric. With the wall down, they came to know Eric, and through that authentic knowing of another, they discovered a deeper humanity in themselves that led them to seek that deeper humanity in others. A Christian way to express this is to say that following Eric's example and inspiration, they became better at seeking and serving Christ in all people, loving their neighbors as themselves. They became better Christians. And to return to my conversation with the cab driver from Pakistan, they became better children of God.

What had transformed this life, a life that the experts were sure was of no value, into a pearl of great value? Into a life that was rich in itself and enriched the lives of others, who then enriched the lives of still others like the ripples flowing out from a pebble dropped in a lake? The grace of God, a loving family and community, and an indomitable human spirit that refused to be contained by the arbitrary limits of otherness.

By the time of his death, Eric's otherness had become commonplace for me. I was proud of my younger brother. Without knowing it, he taught me one of the most important lessons of my life. Through his practice of taking down the walls of otherness that separated him from others and reaching out to turn strangers into friends, Eric taught me that there are no "other" people. No matter how different we may seem, we share a common humanity that emanates from the Source of goodness and love that is the sovereign, creative center of all that is.

As Eric manifested so magnificently, I believe that the core human curriculum on this Earth is to ground ourselves in the Source of life and to live in a way that develops our full humanity and serves to recognize and help realize the full humanity of all our sisters and brothers on this planet. I believe that our future, as Americans and as citizens of the Earth, demands that we seek out experiences that will help us come to know others, to celebrate their uniqueness, to recognize our shared humanity, and to find common cause in working together for a better world.

Turning the Unfamiliar World into a Neighborhood

In this pursuit, I wish everyone could experience the education I have received over the past eight years through my work with the United Religions Initiative. I believe this education contains essential lessons for deepening the American dream in a way that honors not only the uniqueness

and value of this country but also the uniqueness and value of the rest of the world. Like growing up with Eric, this education has opened my mind and heart, my eyes and ears, and it has caused me to ask fundamental and ongoing questions about how we determine what is of value and what isn't. What is significant accomplishment and what isn't. It has turned an enormous, largely unfamiliar world into a neighborhood and turned a world of strangers into members of one human family. I hope that what follows will give you a vivid and alluring sense of what that education was like and might help you to prize more your own experiences of heart-opening, life-changing education and to seek out new experiences.

First, I'd like to offer some background information about the United Religions Initiative (URI). The seed that has grown into the URI was planted in 1993 with a new recognition that the religions of the world were too often more part of the problem than part of the solution. Specifically, even though the nations of the world had been working together for global cooperation and peace for nearly fifty years through the United Nations, the religions of the world had all too often fanned the flames of division, mutual mistrust, hatred, and violence. They seemed neither to acknowledge nor to practice a common vocation for peace, justice, and healing. The founding vision of the URI was to knit together a global community of people of all faiths to develop and practice this common vocation.⁴ In this community, the uniqueness of each tradition would be respected, all voices would be valued, and none would dominate.

Hired as the founding executive director in 1996, I was charged with sharing this vision with people around the world and inviting them to make it their own and to help it grow into a truly global reality. In this pursuit, I have traveled the world extensively and worked with people from more than sixty countries—from Argentina to India, from South Africa to South Korea, from Pakistan to Egypt, from the Philippines to Israel, from Brazil to England. I traveled bearing the passport of a United States citizen. I traveled as a Caucasian male. I traveled as an Episcopal priest, an ordained member of the worldwide Anglican Communion. But I also traveled as someone charged with carrying a global hope in a way that it would be inviting and accessible to anyone who wished to share in making that hope real. Here are some of the experiences that challenged me to learn—that compelled me to open my heart and mind; to see with new eyes and hear with new ears. They're lessons about what it means to be a citizen of the Earth and a child of God. I believe they're also lessons that lead to a deepening of the American dream.

A Community That Belongs to Everyone but Is Owned by No One

If we accept the insights of paleoanthropologists who cite fossil records placing the oldest known human ancestors in what are modern-day Ethiopia and Kenya 5.8 million years ago, we are one human family and Africa is our ancestral home. I felt this sense of returning to my ancestral homeland in a visceral way when I stood on the ground, first in South Africa in December 1996 and a year later in Kenya. In a way that I could feel but can't explain, the rich earth welcomed me. The spirit of the land embraced me as if I were a long-absent son returning to where I belonged. I was home.

Over the years, my trips to Africa and my experiences of African people have often reinforced that experience of a welcoming embrace. I cannot think about Africa without seeing beguiling smiles and a joy that flows effortlessly into song, dance, and laughter. I remember touring a community center in a Soweto church and hearing the most harmoniously joyful singing. I asked the pastor what the choir was rehearsing. He paused and started laughing. That isn't the choir, he informed me. That's a meeting of mail carriers.

I cannot think about Africa without remembering warm hospitality and a powerful sense of community, of the accountability of each individual for the well-being of the whole. I've seen a deep weariness at the struggle, but often in the context of an indomitable hope for a better tomorrow. I saw that hope reflected in the eyes of children kneeling to receive a blessing at the altar rail of another Soweto church where I was privileged to preach on a Sunday. The light in their eyes blessed me as I offered God's blessing to them. Each of these children was a pearl of great value, to be prized and nurtured by their community, by my community. As I looked into their eyes and they looked into mine, I knew we came from the same Source. I knew I was a part of their community as surely as I was part of the community of the church I attended or of the schools my children attended. As a good member of their community, I had a responsibility for the well-being of its members. My vision of the global community URI sought to create was deepened, challenged, and blessed by those children.

As much as I felt at home in Africa, I often felt that I was home in the midst of unimaginable difference that made me ache trying to take it in, let alone comprehend it. Eventually, this difference, like my experience of blessing at a Soweto altar rail, would give me glimpses of our shared humanity. But first I was merely different.

It is impossible to be human without at times feeling that you are different, that you're an outsider, that you don't belong. I often felt that way, myself, growing up, and I certainly experienced it through Eric. But I grew up a white, Christian male in a country dominated by white, Christian males (an extraordinarily diverse group at that). Though my family was not materially affluent, thanks to scholarships I had the privilege of an outstanding education at a private high school and private colleges. No one, other than I, placed any limits on what I could aspire to in my life. I may have felt countercultural, but I shared the privilege of being part of the dominant culture, with all its opportunity and diverse manifestations.

But in Africa, I was the *other*, and not necessarily an attractive other. Archbishop Desmond Tutu, Nobel Peace Laureate and hero of the struggle to overturn apartheid in South Africa, recounts that when white missionaries arrived in Africa, they had the Bible and black Africans had the land. The missionaries said, "Let us pray." The Africans closed their eyes to pray, and when they opened their eyes, they had the Bible and the missionaries had the land. Archbishop Tutu, a devout Anglican, goes on to say that even so, Africans got the better part of the transaction.

This story draws laughter when Tutu tells it, but underneath the laughter lurks a sense of profound deception and injustice that is central to the corrosive legacy of slavery and colonial domination. Since those early missionaries, Africa has been visited again and again by white people whose proclaimed altruism often masked an impulse toward exploitation and domination, and promised visions of a better world that failed to materialize and often led to a worse world for Africans.

Early on, I discovered that in the eyes of some people, I represented nothing more than the latest appearance of those early missionaries, peddling the promise of a better world that would ultimately make things worse for those it professed to help. From a few people, I experienced a thinly veiled hostility; from most others, a warm welcome that often masked a measure of skepticism.

My first, mostly gentle experience of this skepticism came in an all-day meeting with people from several East African countries to explore their interest in being part of the global effort to develop the URI vision and to give birth to a global organization that could make it real. People were intrigued but also cautious, willing to explore but with many questions and reservations. At the end of the meeting, Sister Laetitia Borg, a Franciscan nun from Malta who had lived and worked in Ethiopia for decades, came up to me. She had attended this meeting, she explained, because she was attracted by the URI vision of interfaith cooperation. But she had also

come because she wanted to see if, as she expected, this was a large luxury liner pulling up and inviting people to climb on board and accompany its captain toward his destination. If this had been the case, she would have walked away. What I have experienced, instead, she said, is a small boat almost alone in a vast ocean looking for other small boats to join it on a journey to a new world they would create together. As she said this, she smiled and added, I want my boat to join. So did many, but not all, of the others.

I have had experiences like this again and again as people from diverse backgrounds from all different parts of the world came together seeking a new possibility for a better tomorrow. They came with a blend of hope and skepticism—the hope fueled by a deep yearning to make a positive difference; the skepticism because they knew how easily hope can be manipulated. They came yearning to be part of something global but not wanting the global aspect to destroy their uniqueness. They wanted to be proud of who they were and where they came from. They also wanted to be proud that they were part of a new global community connecting faithful people of hope, hopeful people of faith, with their sisters and brothers all over the world—a community that belonged to everyone but was owned by no one; a community where all were pearls of great value and each shared a responsibility for all. They wanted to be trusted and to trust, to be listened to and to listen. They wanted to have their own dreams, but they also wanted to be part of a shared dream that was much bigger and more magnificent than anyone could dream alone. And they wanted to believe that this dream could be real and that they could share it without losing it or losing themselves in it.

The Four Questions

A day after the Nairobi meeting, I encountered my most memorable and challenging skeptic, Reverend Jose Chipenda, who for two decades had led the All Africa Council of Churches in its work to address the issues of poverty and division that settled like a plague over this extraordinary continent. A man of practical spirituality, he welcomed me graciously on a Sunday afternoon, served me tea and cookies, and listened politely and carefully as I shared the United Religions Initiative vision. When I finished, he told me politely that he had heard many such visions over the previous twenty years. He had seen many cash-intensive efforts arrive from the North with great promises and little positive practical impact. He didn't see how the URI would be any different. In fact, in a world

where organizations were failing right and left, he questioned the need for another organization that would likely fail. Creating the United Religions Initiative seemed to him to require a lot more energy than it was worth.

Reverend Chipenda was a tough, candid questioner who frequently punctuated the conversation with disarming laughter. His questions often had depth that I only sensed, as his life had been filled with experiences I could only inadequately imagine. He seemed to have a pessimistic view of the future, balanced by an enduring commitment to show up every day to do what he could to create a more positive future. Over the decades, he had experienced much defeat, but he worked tirelessly for victories that would address in practical ways the urgent African hunger for peace, for food, for education, for health care, for respect, and for the freedom to be joyously, proudly African. By the end of our time together, I'd had the workout of my URI life with someone whose depth of experience and wisdom gave him a deep skepticism about this Northern initiative but whose skepticism also walked hand-in-hand with a passionate commitment to serve God's kingdom.

In this spirit, he was open to the possibility that he might be wrong, that the URI effort might be different, might be of value. But as he listened, he was quite clear about how he would judge that value. Before he could support the URI, he would need to see what it would do for three groups of people he had come to recognize in his decades of work across Africa.

The first group, obscenely large given the level of affluence that existed in the world, was the people born to die. The poorest of the poor, they lacked the barest necessities to sustain the spark of life. They would die of malnutrition, of dysentery, of preventable diseases, of violence. Their time on this Earth would be like the flare of a match that goes out without ever fully igniting. What, Reverend Chipenda wanted to know, would the URI offer these people who were born to die?

The second group, the overwhelming majority of humans, was the people born to survive. Though their match would ignite, they would spend their lives laboring merely to sustain a simple flame. What, Reverend Chipenda wanted to know, would the URI offer these people who were born to survive?

The third group, a tiny part of the overall population, was the people born to live. These were the candles lit with the matches of those born to survive. They were privileged to receive an education and have a path prepared for them so that they didn't have to struggle merely to survive. They would have the privilege of exploring what it meant truly to live. What, Reverend Chipenda wanted to know, would the URI offer to and ask of these people who were born to live?

I left my meeting with Reverend Chipenda grateful for the privilege of having stood for a brief time inside a world that was not my own, weathering difficult questions to challenge and guide my efforts. I had seen myself and the world I came from in a harsh new light. I wanted to say, “We’re not like that. I’m not like that.” But in my heart I knew that I *was* like that. I was part of that privileged minority who were born to live and who predominantly populated the northern hemisphere. I could climb on a plane, leave this world and its struggles behind, and return to the dominant culture of which I was, by accident of birth, a part. I could leave behind those children in Soweto and the struggles that would oppress their young lives.

But I could not leave behind Reverend Chipenda’s questions, illuminated by the light from those children’s eyes. The questions and the light will travel with me forever. They will always provide and illuminate a plumb line, like the one revealed to the Hebrew prophet Amos, with which I measure the success of my work.⁵ In these days when so many people measure America’s worth by military might and GDP, I would like us to take the measure of our worth by our ability to answer Reverend Chipenda’s questions, adding to them a fourth: What will we do to respect and restore the web of all life on Earth? In light of the pressing needs of the human family, it seems the American dream must send its roots deeper into the one Earth from which it has risen in order to live with and give life to these questions.

The Deeper Water of Otherness

That day at dusk, I took a solitary walk from my hotel. Soon I was in a park with shirtless, barefoot men and boys playing soccer on dusty fields and families out for a Sunday stroll. In this living picture of community, I was alone. Even in the eyes of those who greeted me warmly, I saw that I was different. I realized that I was the only white person in sight. Suddenly, I felt that I was not home. I was a guest in other people’s home. And for some of them, what they saw in me wasn’t welcome. I felt a deep loneliness, a yearning to be among “my own kind.” Inside, I couldn’t have been any farther away from the blessing I had received in Soweto. I wanted to weep.

I would share this gift of momentary desolation some months later at a meeting at my son’s high school where the students of color, who were a small minority, shared the searing difficulty of each day being the *other* in this open but majority-dominated community.

I think I understand your experience, I said, and recounted my experience of that evening in Nairobi. I think I understand your loneliness, but

even in understanding, I know my experience that evening was different. Even as I felt so alone, I knew that I would get on a plane and return to my country, where my culture was dominant. I know you can't do that, I said to these young people. And I thought to myself that the URI's work, humanity's work, was to create a place where even minority cultures can feel at home, can feel that they belong, that their ways of being in the world and seeing the world are understood and respected. Because everybody is a minority somewhere.

For this to happen, we all need to move gently away from the safe shore of our belonging into the deeper water of otherness. If we do this intentionally and together, with the Spirit of Wisdom guiding our way, we just might discover that our little boat has been joined by many other little boats that we recognize as different and yet the same. We might sail into a new future that we create together—a new American dream that grows in humility and consciousness, including all voices, until it is a dream of the Earth, cherished by all. Until it is a waking dream in which we've built bridges and taken down walls and are working together to answer Reverend Chipenda's questions so that all of the Earth community might be born to live.

My experience of the anguish and experienced otherness of the ethnic minority students in a progressive private school that prided itself on its approach to diversity deepened the lesson I had learned in Africa. If we attempt to ground our common humanity on the foundational norms of a dominant culture, we will always be creating outsiders. Yes, everyone has to be from somewhere. Every one of us has a culture that is native to us, and those cultures, as they lead to a full experience of life that does not oppress and exploit others, deserve to thrive.

But if we are to live together as one community, whether in America or in the world, we have to experience, learn how to value, and be willing to have our vision of the world and our ways of doing things affected by our encounters with others. For people in the United States, this means opening ourselves more and more to the enrichment of cultural difference, within and outside the geographical boundaries of our country. It also means seeking out, in our country, the voices of minority cultures, which all too often have been repressed, to share in telling the story of the American people. For all the education I've had in my life, I find myself amazingly ignorant of these voices. When I travel to other countries, no matter how much I study in advance, I expect to be ignorant. But I shouldn't be ignorant in my own country. I should have heard the voices of minority cultures. I thank God that my work in the United Religions Initiative has taught me to seek them out.

Sojourner Truth

In this spirit, I'd like to share one such voice. In 1851, a women's rights convention convened in Akron, Ohio. Sojourner Truth, an escaped slave who had gained her freedom, attended, much to the concern of many of the white women there. They were afraid of having their cause derailed by having it lumped in with the abolitionist movement and were seemingly terrified at the prospect of having an *uneducated* black woman speak before an audience that contained highly educated men who were hostile to the rights of women, to say nothing of the rights of blacks.

On the second day of the convention, clergymen from various Christian denominations put forward a range of arguments against women's rights, including women's weaker intellect, the manhood of Christ, and the role of the first woman, Eve, in humanity's fall from grace. As it seemed that these arguments might win the day, Sojourner Truth stepped onto the stage and, though many of the women present objected, delivered the following speech, which was greeted with rising crescendos of applause, emboldening the assembled women and vanquishing the arguments of the objecting men:

Well, children, where there is so much racket there must be something out of kilter. I think that 'twixt the negroes of the South and the women at the North, all talking about rights, the white men will be in a fix pretty soon. But what's all this here talking about?

That man over there says that women need to be helped into carriages, and lifted over ditches, and to have the best place everywhere. Nobody ever helps me into carriages, or over mud-puddles, or gives me any best place! And ain't I a woman? Look at me! Look at my arm! I have ploughed and planted, and gathered into barns, and no man could head me! And ain't I a woman? I could work as much and eat as much as a man—when I could get it—and bear the lash as well! And ain't I a woman? I have borne thirteen children, and seen most all sold off to slavery, and when I cried out with my mother's grief, none but Jesus heard me! And ain't I a woman?

Then they talk about this thing in the head; what's this they call it? [a member of audience whispers, "intellect"] That's it, honey. What's that got to do with women's rights or negroes' rights? If my cup won't hold but a pint, and yours holds a quart, wouldn't you be mean not to let me have my little half measure full?

Then that little man in black there, he says women can't have as much rights as men, 'cause Christ wasn't a woman! Where did your

Christ come from? Where did your Christ come from? From God and a woman! Man had nothing to do with Him.

If the first woman God ever made was strong enough to turn the world upside down all alone, these women together ought to be able to turn it back, and get it right side up again! And now they is asking to do it, the men better let them.

Obligated to you for hearing me, and now old Sojourner ain't got nothing more to say.⁶

By the time Sojourner Truth had finished speaking, she had been transformed, in the eyes of the white women present, from an embarrassment to a hero. At least for a moment, these women had been drawn past obvious otherness onto the ground of common humanity. There they were united in the pursuit of basic human rights and justice, united in a struggle to claim as their birthright the history-shattering assertions of the Declaration of Independence: "We hold these Truths to be self-evident, that all Men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the Pursuit of Happiness."

Sojourner Truth's courageous eloquence, which was not refined by formal education but forged in the cruelly dehumanizing furnace of slavery, exposed lies that had been promulgated as divine truth—that women and people with dark skin were inherently, though differently, inferior. Following this belief, the dominant white male culture felt no need to extend America's fundamental human rights to women and people with dark skin. Instead, while claiming to champion these basic rights, those in power could violate them with seeming impunity. They cast a long and destructive shadow, which to this day blocks out the sun of equal opportunity in many of this country's inner cities and populates our prisons disproportionately with people of color.

As I have learned through my travels in Africa, we all, wittingly or unwittingly, cast a shadow as we seek to protect and preserve our rights and privileges at the expense of the basic rights of others. Thank God we also carry within us the seeds of righteousness and justice that have animated every movement for human freedom and justice in history. We need to develop a keen awareness of the shadow we cast, and we need to nurture the seeds of righteousness and justice that motivate us "to form a more perfect union." In this pursuit, we must ask who are the Sojourner Truths of our time whose messages we may be reluctant to hear though they have the potential to draw us, as Sojourner Truth and my brother, Eric, drew us, past an experience of obvious otherness onto the ground of our com-

mon humanity, allowing us to see otherness as an enriching and essential gift in the human journey toward peace, justice, and healing.

The Shadow We Cast

Scientists speculate that up to 225 million years ago, the Earth was home to one supercontinent, called Pangaea, surrounded by one enormous ocean, called Panthalassa. Then everything started to move. By 200 million years ago, Pangaea had broken into two continents—a northern one, Laurasia, and a southern one, Gondwanaland. By 65 million years ago, today's continents and oceans existed, though they have been drifting for all these years to reach the locations they are in today. And they're still drifting. Who knows where they'll be in another 65 million years—or if there will still be life on Earth?

Recent fossil discoveries place the oldest known *Homo sapiens* in Ethiopia about 160,000 years ago. Like the continents, our human ancestors didn't stay put. They too started moving. Scientists speculate that the first *Homo sapiens* to migrate from Africa to the Americas, the ancestors of today's Native Americans, arrived in the Americas at least 30,000 years ago. The first Europeans set foot in the Americas a little over 500 years ago and soon had a profound impact on the people who had been living here for thousands of years. Here is one face of that impact:

1562

Fray Diego de Landa throws into the flames, one after the other, the books of the Mayas.

The inquisitor curses Satan, and the fire crackles and devours. Around the incinerator, heretics howl with their heads down. Hung by the feet, flayed with whips, Indians are doused with boiling wax as the fire flares up and the books snap, as if complaining.

Tonight, eight centuries of Mayan literature turn to ashes. On these long sheets of bark paper, signs and images spoke: They told of work done and days spent, of the dreams and the wars of a people born before Christ. With hog-bristle brushes, the knowers of things had painted these illuminated, illuminating books so that the grandchildren's grandchildren should not be blind, should know how to see themselves and see the history of their folk, so they should know the movements of the stars, the frequency of eclipses and the prophecies of the gods and so they could call for rains and good corn harvests.

In the center, the inquisitor burns the books. Around the huge bonfire, he chastises the readers.⁷

As I have discovered in my work with the United Religions Initiative, that impact continues up and down the Americas to this day. In May 1997, I was in Buenos Aires, Argentina, for a URI conference. Returning from a break on the first day, I saw a group of indigenous men and women huddled together and by themselves. Wanting to be hospitable, I walked over and asked if I could join them. They welcomed me warmly. I asked their opinion of the conference. My question ignited a conversation that was carried on over the next three days as they shared their experience with me at increasingly deep levels.

Rosalia Gutierrez, a young Kolla woman, told me that she could barely speak her people's language. Missionaries had cut out her grandparents' tongues to keep them from teaching their *pagan* language to their children. This barbaric act, they assured me, was simply one example of how their people had suffered at the hands of the colonizers. Another of the group introduced himself as Santos Estrada but quickly added that his real name was Chiru Chiru, a name he was not allowed to use because it was a native name. Robbed of their languages and their names and forbidden to practice their rituals, they and their cultures had been pushed to the brink of extinction. And this was not simply an experience of the past. They were not welcomed in the present day by the dominant culture in Argentina. They were socially and economically marginalized. Their people were still preyed on by Christian missionaries who divided families and further weakened their tenuous hold on their heritage.

I returned home from Buenos Aires with a deep stirring in my soul and a commitment to help indigenous people find a place at the URI's table where they could speak from their own traditions with their own voices. The impact of my conversations in Buenos Aires and others with indigenous people in the coming years made it clear that the URI community would not be whole until indigenous people were full participants. This realization is reflected at the beginning of the URI charter: "We, people of diverse religions, spiritual expressions and indigenous traditions throughout the world, hereby establish the United Religions Initiative to promote enduring, daily interfaith cooperation, to end religiously motivated violence and to create cultures of peace, justice and healing for the Earth and all living beings."

The Wisdom of the Tribes

Over the years, I have received an extraordinary education at the hands of committed, patient indigenous people. I've learned new depths of gratitude and gained a deeper reverence for the Earth and all life. I've learned

anew the importance of sinking deep spiritual roots and listening carefully for the movement of the Spirit; I've learned the importance of seeing the sacred in each moment. I've experienced the power of a practice of community where each individual has a clear responsibility to serve the whole. I've been blessed with gracious hospitality. I've been challenged to see time as cyclical, not linear, to be experienced in the fullness of each moment rather than measured by an expensive watch or contained in a Palm Pilot. I've learned anew the value of deep deliberation in a world where there is such a rush to decision and decisive action.

This education was far different from the education I received in elementary school in Oklahoma when I was taught about the "five civilized tribes" of Oklahoma. As I learned it, the Cherokee, Chickasaw, Choctaw, Seminole, and Creek peoples were "civilized" because they adopted the ways of the white settlers. The education I was to receive from indigenous people around the world would force me to ask again and again what it meant to be civilized and what gave one people the right to determine that other people were not civilized.

I was taught about the "five civilized tribes," but I wasn't taught about the Iroquois Confederacy, perhaps the world's oldest participatory democracy, founded well before the arrival of Europeans in what is now the northeastern United States. In the late fourteenth or early fifteenth century, leaders of five nations—Mohawk (People Possessors of the Flint), Onondaga (People on the Hills), Seneca (Great Hill People), Oneida (Granite People), and Cayuga (People at the Mucky Land)—created the confederacy to ensure peace among their peoples. In the eighteenth century, they were joined by the Tuscarora (Shirt-Wearing People). For centuries before the American Revolution, the founding wisdom of the Iroquois Confederacy, which would have a profound impact on the drafters of the United States Constitution, was passed down orally from generation to generation. This wisdom invoked the guidance of the Creator and reflected a deep reverence for the whole Earth community:

Whenever the Confederate Lords shall assemble for the purpose of holding a council, the Onondaga Lords shall open it by expressing their gratitude to their cousin Lords and greeting them, and they shall make an address and offer thanks to the earth where men dwell, to the streams of water, the pools, the springs and the lakes, to the maize and the fruits, to the medicinal herbs and trees, to the forest trees for their usefulness, to the animals that serve as food and give their pelts for clothing, to the great winds and the lesser winds, to the Thunderers, to the Sun, the mighty warrior, to the moon, to the messengers of the

Creator who reveal his wishes and to the Great Creator who dwells in the heavens above, who gives all the things useful to men, and who is the source and the ruler of health and life. Then shall the Onondaga Lords declare the council open.⁸

It created a democratic government that honored the leadership of women as well as men:

If at any time it shall be manifest that a Confederate Lord has not in mind the welfare of the people or disobeys the rules of this Great Law, the men or women of the Confederacy, or both jointly, shall come to the Council and upbraid the erring Lord through his War Chief. If the complaint of the people through the War Chief is not heeded the first time it shall be uttered again and then if no attention is given a third complaint and warning shall be given. If the Lord is contumacious the matter shall go to the council of War Chiefs. The War Chiefs shall then divest the erring Lord of his title by order of the women in whom the titleship is vested. When the Lord is deposed the women shall notify the Confederate Lords through their War Chief, and the Confederate Lords shall sanction the act. The women will then select another of their sons as a candidate and the Lords shall elect him.⁹

It created a high vision of enlightened leadership founded in deep, spiritual values:

The Lords of the Confederacy of the Five Nations shall be mentors of the people for all time. The thickness of their skin shall be seven spans—which is to say that they shall be proof against anger, offensive actions and criticism. Their hearts shall be full of peace and good will and their minds filled with a yearning for the welfare of the people of the Confederacy. With endless patience they shall carry out their duty and their firmness shall be tempered with a tenderness for their people. Neither anger nor fury shall find lodgement in their minds and all their words and actions shall be marked by calm deliberation.¹⁰

Though I was taught about the “five civilized tribes,” I wasn’t taught about this extraordinary example of the “civilization” of Native Americans enriching the understanding of democracy that informed the founding of the United States. I learned nothing of the deep spiritual values that shaped their reverence for the Earth and all life, their recognition of

women's vital leadership role, and their understanding of the essential qualities of leadership.

Looking at this nation's numerous environmentally ravaged Superfund sites, I wonder what might have been different if our founding fathers had adopted more of the environmental ethic of the Iroquois Confederacy and other indigenous peoples. Seeing how greatly our nation has been enriched by the increasing presence of women in leadership roles in every walk of life, I wonder how our history might have been different if our founding fathers had, like the members of the Iroquois Confederacy, seen the necessity of women's leadership for a healthy society. And perhaps most important, I wonder how the history of this nation might have been altered if the people of European ancestry who came to and developed this country had been more open to seeing, learning from, and living with the different civilizations that had existed here for centuries before the first European settler set foot on this land. Today, I yearn for the wisdom of this ancestry to reinvigorate and deepen the American dream.

“Civilizing” the Other

My formal education in American history also avoided the Indian boarding schools that were developed to “civilize” Native American children, beginning in the late eighteenth century. During this time, the government removed Indian children from their homes and placed them in boarding schools where they were forced to learn the *civilized* ways of the dominant Christian culture. At the Native American Prayer Vigil for the Earth in September 2000, held next to the Washington Monument, I received a present-day perspective on these schools from Clyde Bellecourt, an Ojibway and one of the founders of the American Indian Movement. The prayer vigil is an annual event that makes a powerful, if largely invisible, contribution to the future of this country by bringing people of all faiths together under the leadership of Native Americans to pray for the Earth and for peace, understanding, and justice. From sunrise Saturday until midafternoon Sunday, people gather around a sacred fire for prayer, meditation, teaching, music, dance, and the celebration of life.

During one teaching, Clyde Bellecourt spoke movingly of his mother's experience at a boarding school. He explained that she had hidden this part of her life from him until he nearly died from a gunshot wound at the Indian occupation of Wounded Knee, North Dakota, for seventy-one days in 1973. Moved by her son's struggle to regain his culture, she finally told him of the hardships she had endured when she was forcibly removed from her home and placed in a boarding school. There the children were

forbidden to speak any language other than English and to say any prayers other than Christian prayers. If she was caught speaking her native language or praying in a native way, Clyde's mother told him, she was forced to clean floors on her knees with a toothbrush. When this punishment wasn't enough to keep her from speaking and praying in her native way, she was forced to clean the floors wearing kneepads with marbles in them. She had hidden this from her children because she hadn't wanted them to grow up plagued by bitterness.

"We hold these Truths to be self-evident, that all Men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the Pursuit of Happiness." Though I often studied these words from the Declaration of Independence in school, I was never taught about boarding schools for Indian children, and I imagine that to this day, most Americans don't know they existed. It is difficult to see what these boarding schools had to do with Indian peoples' inalienable right to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. If the words of the Declaration of Independence are to have real meaning, our society needs to hear the voices of Indian people, to hear their grievances and their wisdom. These voices have been and remain indispensable to deepening the American dream. This story calls all of us to be accountable for the injustices of the past. That it is told in the context of an interfaith prayer vigil led by Native Americans affirms that out of the seeds of bitterness and hatred can grow the fruit of reconciliation and hope.

Sharing the Dance

In 1999, the URI held a visioning conference for 120 Brazilians from thirty-five religious and spiritual traditions. We met in Itatiaia, a national park in the middle of the rain forest halfway between São Paulo and Rio de Janeiro. Our main meeting room had windows on all sides and seemed suspended above the rain forest canopy, giving us the feeling that we were floating in midair above this lush, tropical beauty. Early in the conference, people were asked, in small groups, to collectively envision the positive future they wished to inhabit. Then they were asked to find a creative way to present their vision to the whole group.

One group's presentation captured and enhanced the spirit of the gathering perfectly. To begin, members of the group circulated throughout the room, distributing different-colored pieces of card stock, each about eight inches long, the size of an envelope, with a diamond-shaped hole in the

center. Once the pieces were distributed, the group began singing a familiar Brazilian song with a refrain that, loosely translated, went, “There are times when we ask ourselves why don’t we gather everything together into one!” As everyone joined in the song, one member of the group, an indigenous man in ceremonial dress, circulated around the room and collected the brightly colored cards on an arrow. Then the arrow, with the cards adorning it like a rainbow of feathers from rain forest birds, was hung from the ceiling, where it remained for the rest of the conference as a symbol of unity in diversity.

The symbol sprang to life that evening as the indigenous people, whose leadership had been especially invited, led the whole group in a ceremony of peace and reconciliation. We gathered in a clearing in the rain forest, in a large circle around a bonfire, under a full moon. In turn, representatives from each of four different Indian nations, dressed in ceremonial clothing, performed a sacred dance around the fire. Then all four nations danced together. We later learned they had never danced together before.

The previous night, it had grown later and later as they struggled to create the ritual for this evening. Finally, one member of the community wondered if the reason they were having so much difficulty was that historically, their peoples had been more enemies than friends. All agreed that there was wisdom in his observation. They realized that they needed to perform a ritual of peace and reconciliation among themselves before they could lead the rest of the group in such a ritual. Dancing together was their expression of an intention to work for peace and reconciliation among themselves.

Once they had finished their shared dance, they stepped back into the larger circle and led the whole group in a sacred circle dance. Holding hands in the circle were Buddhist monks, Dominican priests, Hindu swamis, Sufi sheikhs, a rabbi, Candomble elders, and many others. Every size, shape, and color, men and women, young and old. Holding hands and dancing in a circle of peace and healing around a bonfire under a full moon in the middle of the Brazilian rain forest—a living, sacred symbol of the unity that is possible in the extraordinary diversity of humanity. Or to put it in the words of a Lakota prayer that acknowledges the sacred interconnectedness of all life, *mitakuye oyasin*, which means “all my relations” or “we are all related.”

Our dance that night did not solve the world’s problems. It didn’t even solve all the problems that arose from all the diverse views presented at the conference. But it did transform us all for an evening that would reverberate over the years with a living experience of *mitakuye oyasin*.

The Risk to Shed Otherness

My experience working with the United Religions Initiative is that again and again, people's initial experiences of otherness turn into experiences of *mitakuye oyasin*. This happens because we take great care to build relationships among people in ways that turn differences into points of connection. For instance, in many places around the world, people of different faiths barely know each other and often regard each other with suspicion, if not open hostility. I encountered that vividly in the conference that grew out of the 1997 meeting in Nairobi, Kenya, I mentioned earlier. The conference brought together people from nine different countries in East Africa. Two days into the conference, people came up to me, saying, "I'm a Muslim, and I was afraid to come to this conference because I was afraid I was going to have to sit down and talk with a Christian"; or "I'm a Christian, and I was afraid to come to this conference because I was afraid I was going to have to sit down and talk with a Muslim."

Beneath these fears was an almost paralyzing perception of otherness—otherness of belief, otherness of culture—and sometimes a history of conflict between local Christian and Muslim communities. But it was also true, more often than not, that the individuals who felt this otherness had never really taken the time or found the opportunity to sit down and get to know the other in a way that made them both fully human, in a way that was grounded not on what separated two groups of people but on the powerful points of connection that might give them an experience of their common humanity.

In the URI, we have always attempted to provide such experiences, beginning with one-on-one conversations that invited people from different backgrounds to come to know each other in an appreciative way. For instance, Christians and Muslims who came to the conference in Nairobi paired up and took turns answering questions such as these:

I'd like to get to know you better so we can work together in this conference. Please think about your life. You've probably experienced ups and downs, peaks and valleys. I would like you to think about a peak—a time when you were involved in something meaningful and felt truly alive, proud, creative, effective, engaged. Please share the story of this experience. What made it a peak experience? What felt truly special? Are there lessons that might be brought to this work?

To help me know more about your religion, would you please share with me the most precious gift you have received from your faith? It might be a teaching, a value or a practice, or a passage from a sacred text or a particular leader. Would you please share this with me as though I am child in school and you're giving me your most precious gift?

Without being too humble, what is it that you value most about yourself that you would like to contribute to the work of interfaith cooperation? What are your best qualities, skills, experiences?

We all have visions of a better world, often inspired by our faith. Imagine that our communities have been working together for thirty years and have succeeded in creating a better world for everyone. Please share with me your vision of what life is like in that better world.

After sharing such questions with someone you've never met before, someone whom you have viewed only as an other, a transformation takes place. First, in answering the questions, you are put in touch with deep personal experiences and beliefs that represent the best of who you are, and this best of who you are is experienced and appreciated by this strange other. At the same time, that person is put in touch with the best of who he or she is, and as you listen appreciatively, you see that person through new eyes. Otherness is transformed into *mitakuye oyasin*. This doesn't mean that the differences have disappeared. It doesn't mean that there will be no disagreements, tensions, or conflicts. But it does mean that those disagreements, tensions, and conflicts will be worked through on a foundation of mutual respect rather than on a foundation of suspicion.

And so it was, in Nairobi, that when Christians and Muslims shared that they had been afraid to come to the conference because they would have to talk with the other, each of them went on to say that they had overcome their fear and were grateful they had come. In place of a misunderstood, untrustworthy other, they now had a new colleague. Yes, differences still existed. They didn't agree on everything, but they had discovered common experiences and shared yearnings that led to a shared commitment to work together to make their visions of a better world real.

Together, they had experienced a deeper identity than Christian and Muslim. They had come to see each other and themselves as children of God. Together, they had experienced a deeper identity than Rwandan and Ugandan. They had come to see each other and themselves as sisters and

brothers of Africa and of the Earth. This transformation in vision was not the end of a journey but the beginning of one, a journey to build bridges across the chasms that divided them so that they might work together for the common good. This experience of transformation, like the manna from heaven that sustained the Hebrew people during their forty years in the wilderness, was a gift that made new life possible but must be renewed every day.

And it has been. Inspired by that conference, thousands of people of different faiths all over Africa have come together as part of the URI. Each day they cooperate to help stop the spread of HIV/AIDS and to care for those suffering from the ravages of this disease. They conduct trainings in peace-building skills and work to resolve violent conflicts. They do economic development work. They visit the sick and care for the needy. They do interfaith education. And much more. It is a small part of all that needs to be done, but the people involved are filled with purpose, hope, and a sense of accomplishment. They have taken a small step toward answering Reverend Chipenda's questions.

We Are Still One

In all my work with the United Religions Initiative, my most extreme experience of otherness came on a 1996 trip to Cairo. The journey had begun with a flight to Buenos Aires on Thanksgiving Day, followed by a flight from there to Johannesburg four days later. After eight days in South Africa, I flew up the length of Africa and landed in Cairo as the sun was rising. As I climbed down the stairs to the tarmac, I looked across a vast, sandy emptiness and saw a thin crescent moon and the morning star sitting just above the horizon in the pink of early dawn. I was so disoriented from this trip—it had taken me southward down the spine of the Americas, from the northern hemisphere to the southern hemisphere, then eastward across the Atlantic Ocean from the western hemisphere to the eastern hemisphere, then northward up the length of Africa from the southern hemisphere back to the northern hemisphere—that I had an unshakable sense that the sun was rising in the west. My disorientation was only beginning.

After I had navigated my way through immigration, claimed my baggage, and cleared customs, I found a cab to take me to the Royal Crown Hotel. Once we were under way, I realized that all the signs were in Arabic. Only occasionally was a sign in English, and that was likely to be for McDonald's or KFC or Baskin-Robbins, which reinforced the disorienta-

tion I felt because they seemed so out of place. While I marveled at the beautifully flowing Arabic script, I could not begin to decipher what it said. During the six days I spent in Cairo, I quickly learned to have someone write my destination out in Arabic so that I could show it to a cab driver. That helped the cab driver, which was essential, but it wasn't much help to me. Even when I had my destination written out, I could not match what was written on the paper with what was written on the signs all around me. Even when I knew where I was going, I had no way of knowing when I had arrived.

Growing up in Tulsa, Oklahoma, from the late fifties through the sixties, religious diversity was largely an abstract concept. The community was overwhelmingly "religious" and in that context overwhelmingly Christian, being part of the buckle of the Bible Belt. Public schools observed Good Friday as an official holiday. For me, being religious meant attending an Episcopal church, and that's what I knew. My experience of religious diversity was hearing stories about Roman Catholics and how they had lists of books they couldn't read and movies they couldn't see or seeing the evangelists who regularly popped up on the television. I was aware of Judaism mainly because we Christians had appropriated the Hebrew scriptures as our own. I did go to school with a few Jewish children, and I knew that Jews (and blacks and probably Indians as well) were denied membership at most country clubs. If there were Muslims in Tulsa at that time, I never heard them mentioned and certainly have no recollection of ever meeting anyone who was identified as a Muslim.

It's interesting to note that in the months after September 11, 2001, Muslims around the United States held "open mosques" in an attempt to get to know their neighbors better and have their neighbors get to know them better. In their way, they were attempting to do what the URI did in that conference in Nairobi and has done all over the world—bring people who don't know each other and may have negative stereotypes of each other together in an appreciative way, to build a new and more broadly inclusive community. To my surprise and delight, a mosque in Tulsa held an open house. My mother, who still lives in Tulsa, attended and came away with a new appreciation for her Muslim neighbors.

It was a long journey from this Tulsa experience (or lack of experience) to Egypt, where Muslims are the overwhelming majority and Christians a tiny minority. As you drive through the streets of Cairo, which are generally impassible, mosques are everywhere. Five times a day, the Muslim call to prayer is broadcast in Arabic from towering minarets that make mosques the most conspicuous structures around. Friday is the sacred

center of the week, the day all shops close and people spend their time worshipping God and being with their families. On Fridays, the streets are nearly deserted. In Cairo, Sunday is just another day.

I felt profoundly *other* in Cairo as I rode in a taxi through the barely moving traffic—no familiar sights, no road signs I could read, feeling conspicuous in my whiteness and in the assumed affluence that led most people to treat me as if I were a walking dollar sign. Then I met Dr. Mohammed Shaalan, a Muslim psychotherapist who was interested in interfaith work.

He welcomed me to his apartment, offered me tea, and immediately asked me a question about the United Religions Initiative. Let's say we have a spectrum, he proposed. Aldous Huxley's perennial philosophy, which makes all religion into one religion, is on one end, and the present condition of extreme division is on the other. Where does this Initiative fit in? I responded by saying that the URI did not seek to make one religion but to bring people of different faiths together in mutual respect to work for the well-being of all. He nodded his head and asked what motivated me, a Christian, to be involved in interfaith work.

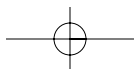
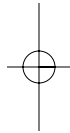
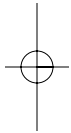
In response, I shared with him a story from the twenty-fifth chapter of the Gospel of Matthew: At the end of time, the Son of Humanity comes in great glory surrounded by his angels. After calling the nations to him, he separates the righteous from the unrighteous as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. Then he turns to the righteous and invites them to enter the paradise that was prepared for them at the foundation of the world, because he was hungry and they fed him, thirsty and they gave him something to drink, a stranger and they welcomed him, naked and they clothed him, sick and in prison and they visited him. The righteous are startled and ask the Lord when they have done these things for him. He responds that whenever they have done these things for the most unfortunate, they have done them for him.

As I finished this story, Dr. Shaalan looked at me, smiling, and said, "You have just recited for me the Koran."

His response could not have been more unexpected—or more welcome. The feeling of otherness that had taken hold of me the moment I landed in Cairo melted. Coming from different religions, different nations, and different cultures, we had found the common ground of our dedication to lives of service. Yes, he was a Muslim and I a Christian. Yes, he was an Egyptian and I an American. But in that moment, we were humans together. We were children of God together. And we saw a common vocation: to bridge the chasms and take down the walls that divide and to work together for the well-being of all.

Thousands of experiences like the ones I have recounted here have gone into the birth of the global community that is the United Religions Initiative, an organization that belongs to everyone and is owned by no one—like the Earth. It is a tiny beginning, but one that holds hope for a positive future, one that leads away from terror toward community, one that lights a path toward a deeper American dream that joins a common dream for all people on Earth.

Scientists speculate that up to 225 million years ago, the Earth was home to one supercontinent, called Pangaea, surrounded by one enormous ocean, called Panthalassa. Then everything started to move. My experience growing up and my work with the United Religions Initiative have taught me that we are still moving and yet we are still one. The future of America cannot be separated from the future of the rest of the world. There are no longer chasms deep enough or walls high enough to protect us from others or to protect others from us. So what do we do? We might begin by seeing ourselves as citizens of the Earth and children of the abiding Mystery at the heart of all that is. Then, with open hearts and appreciative, inquiring minds, set out on a journey to encounter the other and find ourselves. It might be as simple as hailing a cab on the deserted early-morning streets of Manhattan or as disorienting as stepping out of an airplane at sunrise into the different world that is Cairo. I've begun such a journey with tens of thousands of other people. It's a sacred journey toward our shared human vocation for peace, justice, and healing. I commend it to you. It has changed my life. It has changed many lives. I believe it will change the world—not make it perfect, but make it better. Much better.



Notes

1. Gabriel García Márquez, *Cien Años de Soledad* (Madrid: Colección Austral, 1967), p. 1.
2. Gabriel García Márquez, *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, trans. Gregory Rabassa (New York: HarperCollins, 1991), p. 1.
3. Thich Nhat Hanh, *Old Path, White Clouds* (Berkeley: Parallax Press, 1991), p. 384.
4. See Charles Gibbs and Sally Mahé, *Birth of a Global Community* (Cleveland, Ohio: Lakeshore Publications, 2004).
5. Amos, a shepherd in the small Judaeen village of Tekoa, was called around 760 B.C.E. to prophesy a message of justice and righteousness to a nation that placed its faith in military might while it committed grave injustices. He is perhaps best known for the stirring challenge to “let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream” (Amos 5:24). In one of his visions, God shows him how a plumb line is used to make sure the wall of a building is true and then says that he, God, is setting a plumb line of justice and righteousness in the midst of his people to ensure that they are true (Amos 7:7–9).
6. This text is from the Internet Modern History Sourcebook, <http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/mod/sojtruth-woman.html>; the background to it is explained at <http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/mod/sojtruth2.html>. Electronic version copyright © 1997 Paul Halsall (halsall@murray.fordham.edu).
7. Eduardo Galeano, *Memory of Fire: I. Genesis*, trans. Cedric Belfrage (New York: Norton, 1985), p. 137.
8. “Constitution of the Iroquois Nations: The Great Binding Law, Gayanashagowa,” art. 7. Prepared by Gerald Murphy; distributed by the

Cybercasting Services Division of the National Public Telecomputing Network. Obtained from the Internet Modern History Sourcebook, <http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/mod/iroquois.html>.

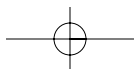
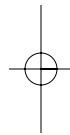
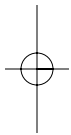
9. Ibid., art. 19.
10. Ibid., art. 27.

The Author

THE REVEREND CANON CHARLES GIBBS has served as the founding executive director of the United Religions Initiative (URI) for the past eight years. The URI signed its global charter in June 2000 and has 270 member Cooperation Circles active in over fifty countries around the world. Their work across the globe involved hundreds of thousands of people this past year and includes peace building, interfaith education, HIV/AIDS prevention, environmental awareness, human rights advocacy, and community building. More information about the URI is available on its website, www.uri.org.

In his work for the URI, Charles has traveled extensively, working with religious, spiritual, and other leaders in Europe, Africa, the Middle East, North and South America, and Asia. He has been a featured speaker at many international gatherings, including the Parliament of the World's Religions and the Annual Symposium of the International Association of Sufism. He coauthored, with Sally Mahé, *Birth of a Global Community*, a book on the birth of the United Religions Initiative. He contributed a chapter to *Interfaith Dialogue and Peacebuilding* and coauthored, with Barbara Hartford, a chapter in *Positive Approaches to Peacebuilding*. In addition, he has published many articles on interfaith work and Christian spirituality.

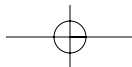
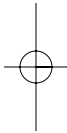
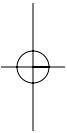
Charles is an Episcopal priest, who brings to his ministry a strong commitment to spiritual transformation and work for peace, justice, and healing. He has an abiding belief in the sacredness of all life. His wife, Debbie, is head of the upper school and assistant head for academic affairs at Marin Country Day School. Their daughter, Naomi, is a sophomore at Marin Academy. Their son, Ben, teaches at Austin High School in Houston, Texas, through the Teach for America program of Americorps.



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