



After the Fact | Restoring Community: Embracing Interfaith

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TRANSCRIPT

Eboo Patel, founder and president, Interfaith America: There are tens of thousands, or hundreds of thousands, of people who look around their community, their fire station, their YMCA, their public library, their local school, and they say, boy, this is religiously diverse. And I know my faith inspires me to be a better person and to serve others. I bet these people's faiths inspire them to be better people and to serve others.

Let's figure out how to do that together.

Dan LeDuc, host: Welcome to "After the Fact." For The Pew Charitable Trusts, I'm Dan LeDuc. We'll be speaking with Eboo Patel as we continue our look at community-building around the nation. He is the founder and president of Interfaith America. Some research from his organization and the Public Religion Research Institute provide our data point for this episode: They found that 72% of Americans report that they have built a relationship with a coworker, neighbor, or classmate who follows a different religion than their own. At a time when many people are focused on the divisions in the country today, it's a promising statistic.

We begin with a conversation with Eboo, an Ismaili Muslim, a small Shia community in Islam, and his colleague and friend Jeff Pinzino, a Unitarian church congregant.

So Eboo and Jeff, welcome. Jeff, what is the state of community in America today?

Jeff Pinzino, senior fellow, Interfaith America: I was trained as a community organizer in the 1990s. I was very deliberate in Chicago about learning what it takes to build community. The people that I learned from put a premium on face-to-face interaction and building trust with people. I worry that community-building for this generation is in danger of becoming a lost art. That the trends that had us bowling alone now have us using bowling apps on our phone. They're not even going to bowling alleys anymore.

Dan: Eboo?

Eboo: Actually, for most of human history until about a century back, you were handed an identity and you were handed a community. If your parents were Southwest Side Catholics in



Chicago, you were going to be a Southwest Side Catholic, and here's the church you were going to go to and you were going to probably marry in this kind of a manner and you were going to work this kind of a job, etc., etc. That's how human beings lived for most of human history.

It's really only since the mid-20th century where human beings had choice in their identity and in their community. And that's led to a lot of positive things in terms of expression, a lot better art; people can pursue individuality and expression. But it's absolutely eroded community.

Dan: You recognized these trends and you both have community organizing backgrounds. That is a skill and an approach to making community better. But you're adding this element of faith. The element of faith for both of you was there from the start. And why was that important for both of you?

Eboo: My story of transitioning from being an angry activist to a social change agent who recognized the power of faith, not only to inspire people's best selves but to inspire civic institutions.

The track was laid for this organization back in college where I would talk with Jeff about issues of diversity and social justice and faith, and we actually cared so much about those issues that we took an entire summer to travel through faith-based social justice communities and got a real deep sense of how people connected their faith with their work to help people in the world. And we talked about an organization that would be embracing of a range of faiths that would nurture positive relationships between them.

Jeff: Eboo and I and some of the other early leaders in the organization rented a house together on the North Side of Chicago. We set up the office in the basement. I think there is something special there that faith connects me to a bigger set of ideas and a more human and holistic approach to people and the world.

Eboo: And that's where Interfaith America came from.

Dan: It feels like religion is about community-building.

Eboo: The way we think of this at Interfaith America is that religious communities have helped build some of America's most important civic institutions, whose purpose is to build community.

So, if you think about higher education, America has something like 1,500 private colleges and universities, of which at least half were built by different religious communities from Georgetown and Notre Dame to Syracuse and Duke and Emory and USC. The YMCA, of course, the Young Men's Christian Association. So many hospitals built by religious communities. So,



religion really contributes in a very kind of grassroots way to America, a ground-level way, but also in the kind of mythmaking of the American community.

Dan: There are unfortunately some places where religion has created barriers in American society and certainly in the world. And what makes religion successful when it can overcome those barriers?

Eboo: So, at Interfaith America we talk about this as faith can be a barrier of division or it can be a bridge of cooperation. So, if you think about a hospital, right now there are 10,000 surgeries happening in America where there's some version of a Muslim physician supported by a Jewish anesthesiologist with a Hindu nurse, the hospital run by a secular humanist. And that's interfaith cooperation. They are doing something very powerful together. They're saving somebody's life. Everybody's praying in their own way.

If you think about American disaster relief, it's the same way.

So, after a hurricane or an earthquake or a tornado, it's the disaster relief arms of the Southern Baptists and the Church of Jesus Christ, the Latter-day Saints, and the Episcopalians. They all show up and they're working together to help others. Those are the kinds of things we want to lift up at Interfaith America and say, religion is already doing this. Let's do more of it.

Dan: So, let's talk specifically about what Interfaith America does to encourage community-building and cooperation and bridge-building between faiths.

Eboo: Over the course of human history, there's been a character called the "interfaith leader" who has brought people who are inspired by their diverse faiths together to build community and serve others.

Martin Luther King Jr. was an interfaith leader. His admiration of Gandhi, the great Hindu leader. His friendship with Abraham Joshua Heschel, marching together at Selma. His correspondence with Thich Nhat Hanh, the great Vietnamese Buddhist monk. His learnings from atheists like Stanley Levinson.

He was very much an interfaith leader who brought people from different faiths together in a movement of human uplift that we call the civil rights movement.

And so, what we do at Interfaith America is we say these characters have existed across history, and they exist today. And our job is to identify and train those people.



Jeff: Part of my work is to find the people that today are walking in the footsteps of Martin Luther King and Thich Nhat Hanh and those interfaith leaders throughout history that have become our inspiration.

I seek out those folks. And then we offer a set of resources to them. We're asking how can we put the resources of the organization behind today's emerging leaders.

Dan: One of those leaders is Syda Segovia Taylor. Her mother is from Colombia and her father is from Honduras and Syda was born and raised in Chicago. Her Bahá'í faith is central to her identity. She moved to the Bronzeville neighborhood on Chicago's South Side to live out her faith's calling and to become involved in the community and social justice issues there. Over time, that work became centralized in an organization she founded called Organic Oneness.

Syda Segovia Taylor, founder and executive director, Organic Oneness: I'm a Bahá'í and that is the driving force with everything that I do in life. So, the way I interact with people, my work, my purpose on Earth, derives from being a Bahá'í.

Dan: I have been to the Bahá'í temple north of Chicago. It's a beautiful, beautiful building. For people who are listening and maybe don't know much about the faith, tell us a little bit about it.

Syda: Bahá'ís believe that Bahá'u'lláh, the prophet founder of the Bahá'í faith, is the most recent messenger of God, and we believe that all the messengers of God come from the same God. Abraham, Krishna, Buddha, Moses, Mohammed, Christ, and Bahá'u'lláh. We feel it's a progressive revelation of understanding God.

Principles are race unity, gender equality, harmony between science and religion, universal education. Bahá'ís are focused on how do we get to a global understanding and seeing humankind as one human family.

Dan: So, tell us about Bronzeville.

Syda: It's known as the Black Metropolis of Chicago. Where black people were told to move, that is where they can live. And so, it was thriving back in the day. You know, businesses, arts, and culture, but we know the legacy of this country: the Chicago race riots and all kinds of horrible stuff in history. A lot of the members in the community want to keep the legacy of Bronzeville alive because it's so rich in history, arts, and culture. In the Bahá'í faith, we're always constantly looking to see how can we be more connected as communities, as a city.

Dan: You know, you got involved in a lot of activities, you said. What was your goal in trying to strengthen community?



Syda: There was really no roadmap of how to do that. I could look back now and say, “Oh, these community-organizing strategies are what I use,” but I didn't know that that was even a thing. In the writings it says love one another. Be friends. Be amongst one another spontaneously. Then, when you have these deep conversations, then you start to dream together, you start to have these ideas together.

Whether it's one on one, or in a small group setting, or in a meeting, the fact that it's a safe space and everyone loves each other and everyone is there for the same goal of making it a better place for the children, then magic happens. I wish I can say, “Oh, I had the secret sauce,” but it's really about staying in there and being a family; it's not all glory. The point is to stay in the room. The point is to say, “I'm in this thick and thin. We're together; we're a team.”

Dan: Being Bahá'í, did you ever get pushback from people of other faiths, and how do you handle it?

Syda: It's all how we look at things, right? And I think the Bahá'í faith offers a solution to exactly what's going on in the world today and how we see those differences. A lot of people see the differences and the diversity as a threat. The Bahá'í faith actually says that our diversity is a gift. That our differences of opinion will spark the truth of what's supposed to happen. It's a matter of practicing self-control. So being detached, getting rid of your own ego, holding yourself accountable to how you're speaking to each other. There's a lot of discipline involved, which I admit I fail sometimes. I'm human. But I have this goal in mind of how I'm supposed to act.

So, if I'm going into a meeting or into a conversation even within my family, and I say, “My way is right,” there's going to be no unity. We're not going to be able to move forward together. I have to have the lens of, I have a piece of the truth. People are beginning to see that and be open-minded to learning about other faiths.

Dan: But her work isn't about evangelization. It's simply about nurturing community by bringing people together and finding out about the needs of the Bronzeville neighborhood and trying to meet them.

Organic Oneness hosts an annual bike ride to help people learn about the history of Bronzeville. There's a yearly wellness conference and a service day to celebrate Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.

Syda: We always start off the year with honoring Dr. King. Helping people remember his legacy, what he stood for, and how we have to keep the dream alive. And so, we work with the Chicago public school system. We identify some buildings that need beautification and then we bring in volunteers to hear Dr. King's words. Some of the students in the area sing the Black national anthem and “We Shall Overcome.”



And then we split everyone off to do service projects in the schools. So, this past year we had about 275 participants, volunteers, doing different service projects. So, murals, cleaning out classrooms.

Audio from NBC Chicago news video featuring the MLK Day of Service

Syda: The principals identify what's needed in their schools and then we send the volunteers over. And for the morning gathering we had about 500 people and we had to turn away folks.

We're hoping next year we can accommodate everyone with the service project. So, we're excited about that.

Dan: Another yearly event is the Be the Healing conference.

Syda: We just had our fifth annual Be the Healing conference this past September. This year we talked about reconciliation and reparations. We invite leaders from the institutions to say, "What are you all doing in terms of these topics?" Then we invite, also, community leaders. We invite parents. We invite students.

Everybody's able to see in that conference what's going on at the community levels and the institutional levels. And so, we're hoping that all the individuals, all the members, all the participants, and the elected officials learn from each other and get a spark of an idea and start implementing some of these ideas in their neighborhoods. And they can talk about it with their family members. That's the hope. And there are always opportunities for everyone to interact, and then everyone walks away with a new understanding.

Dan: You've been hard at work. How do you know if you're having success?

Syda: In my mind, everything's always a success. It's just a learning opportunity. If we didn't have enough people, how do we learn from that? The failure would be to stop trying.

The fact that we're building community, we're creating safe spaces, we're making people happy. That one moment in time we created a spot, a moment for them, that they were safe, and they had food, and they felt love.

Dan: We first heard about Syda and Organic Oneness from Eboo and John at Interfaith America. And they say what's happening in Bronzeville is a success story—and that there are many others like it around the nation.



Jeff: There are hundreds of people across the country that are building bridges, that are connecting people, that are finding common ground and ways to serve across religious diversity. And I can't help but be inspired by that.

Eboo: There's lots of good things to come. There are local leaders who recognize that this is important, and there's national institutions that recognize the importance of cooperation and interfaith leadership.

Dan: Thanks for listening, and please join us in two weeks for more on interfaith community-building.

Alexa, member of the Sisterhood of Salaam Shalom: We have laughed so much in this chapter. We've gotten wildly off-topic plenty of times, but when we then went into difficult conversations, we also said, "OK, let's fall back on the structure that Sisterhood of Salaam Shalom provides for us." And really for our chapter underpinning that was this love and affection for each other.

Dan: Until then, I'm Dan LeDuc, and this is "After the Fact."

If you'd like to see some of the people and places we have visited so far this season, please go to pewtrusts.org/afterthefact to see photos and read descriptions of these moments with communities from Baltimore, Milwaukee, and Philadelphia.

We'd also like to give a special thank you to NBC Chicago featuring their news clip of the Bronzeville community volunteers on Martin Luther King Day.