

Coformation through interreligious learning

By Jennifer Peace

To add the prefix “co” to “formation” and apply it to seminary education is to assert that students are not formed in isolation but in connection to a dynamic web of relationships. Making formation an intentionally interfaith process reflects the reality that our particular beliefs exist in a larger and complex multireligious (and nonreligious) human community, a community we want to prepare our students to both encounter and engage on multiple levels—theological, ethical, and pastoral—as community organizers, educators, preachers, and citizens.

My most profound period of formation took place during the years following the birth of my first son. Born with an immature neurological system, my son was extremely difficult to comfort in his early years. I can distinctly remember the feeling that I was somehow being remade to become this new person called “mother.” It was not a gentle process. It was like being cracked open. Who I had been and what was demanded of me now were so far apart that it required a complete overhaul. I resonate with both the passive and the active connotations of the word *formation*: being formed, and forming myself as a mother, felt like having the building blocks of my identity—beliefs, values, relationships, sense of self, priorities, and limits—torn down and scattered. The fundamentals of who I was remained, but they needed to be radically reconfigured, reinforced, reexamined, reclaimed, and ultimately rebuilt into a stronger, fuller version of myself.

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This experience taught me that periods of formation are powerful times characterized by ambiguity, fear, tension, vulnerability, and

awareness of personal limits, but they are also characterized by openness to new insights, willingness to accept help from fellow travelers, and enormous motivation to overcome obstacles in order to live into that which is being formed. During authentic formation periods, we are asked to step up our game, to expand the previously held limits of our own capacity, to grow, to become more. The people you meet in these periods can have an amplified effect on the person you become.

While perhaps less intense than the transition to motherhood, seminary education, at its best, is an authentic formation period. My work is to capitalize on the potential inherent in this process by introducing Christian and Unitarian Universalist students to their Jewish counterparts. I do this work both in my capacity as assistant professor of Interfaith Studies and under the auspices of the Center for Interreligious and Communal Leadership Education (CIRCLE). Rabbi Or Rose codirects the Center from the Hebrew College (HC) side. He and Andover Newton professor of Old Testament, Gregory Mobley, cofounded the interfaith work along with entrepreneurial students from both campuses. Our joint work is made possible by the providence of proximity, and it began shortly after Hebrew College relocated in 2001 to a new building on the hilltop



Jennifer Peace works with students in

where the Andover Newton (AN) campus has been situated for nearly 200 years.

The work relies on the insights and goodwill of community members at every level of our institutions—administration, staff, faculty, students, alumni/ae, and trustees. Cultivating relations among these various constituents is at the heart of what we do. Key programs include the following:

- ♦ **Interfaith peer groups.** Peer groups originated and have continued to thrive because of the enthusiasm of students on each campus. An outgrowth of the original student interfaith campus group, Journeys on the Hill, peer groups are composed of equal numbers of AN and HC students who commit to meeting each month throughout the year to share questions, insights, and concerns



the Interfaith Studies program.

as they attend to the demands of their own formation.

- ♦ **Joint classes.** While many relationships are forged informally outside the classroom through peer groups and campus events, joint courses remain a cornerstone of our interfaith work. Recently we organized formerly ad hoc joint offerings into a five-course sequence leading to a certificate in Interfaith Leadership. (See Gregory Mobley's article on page 27 for insights from the classroom.)
- ♦ **Joint campus events.** In addition to joint faculty meetings and an annual joint Community Day during which students, faculty,

and staff from HC and AN participate in a day of learning and action, CIRCLE sponsors a series of seasonal and thematic events organized around our respective sacred calendars.

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- ♦ **CIRCLE fellowship program.** Since 2007, thanks to a grant from the Henry Luce Foundation, we have offered stipends to a cohort of six to eight student leaders each year. CIRCLE Fellows work in interfaith pairs to lead social justice initiatives or host events that enhance our mutual community life, while going through a yearlong interfaith leadership development process.
- ♦ **New partnerships.** Connecting the conversations we are having with a broader national conversation about the role of interfaith education in seminaries, we have recently partnered with the *Journal of Interreligious Dialogue* at Auburn Seminary in cooperation with the Parliament of the World Religions to launch a new blog called *State of Formation*, a forum for emerging religious and ethical leaders.

Why do this work?

This work requires care, reverence, humility, honesty, curiosity, trust, and faith. For me as a Christian, it requires faith in the God who knit me together and formed my inward parts (Ps 139:13). It requires the kind of faith that allows me to risk my current identity on the proposition that God may have something greater in store for me. This is a risk we invite others to take too.

Knowing the challenges of the formation process and the added complexity of coformation in an interfaith setting, why do we do this work at all? In part, we do it because it is the best way we know to help students expand their capacity to work alongside others from various backgrounds as they each bring the best theological and ethical resources of their traditions to bear on complex issues plaguing our communities and our planet. It is the best way we know to train students preparing for moments when

they will be asked to sit by a bedside or pray with those who mourn, whether or not they share the same beliefs. It is also one response to a post 9/11 world in need of leaders from within religious communities who can help facilitate dialogue across differences for the sake of a more peaceful future.

Beyond multifaith skill building, this work is also consistent with the task of a seminary educator more generally; namely, to teach students in ways that help them react with grace and openness—rather than fear and resistance—to encounters that invite them to grow. Our job is to build settings where students can be thrown off balance safely, or sit with discomfort longer than they thought possible, or go on a journey where they might lose their way. This place of not knowing, of paradox and challenge, is a place of formation.

Fundamentally, I do this work because it inspires gratitude in me, and I try to navigate toward things that evoke gratitude. In a fragmented, violent world where religious ideology often fans the flames of hatred rather than fueling our passion for justice or increasing our capacity for love, this work is an act of hope. It aligns me with people who aspire to the designation, “the repairer of the breach, the restorer of streets to live in” (Is 58:12). It reminds me that, to be a Christian and to have a living faith, I must remain committed to a perpetual process of conformation. ♦

Jennifer Peace is assistant professor of Interfaith Studies at Andover Newton Theological School in Newton, Massachusetts.



Measuring the impact of research

Who are the ultimate end users for theological research? Joel Green at Fuller Theological Seminary tells of the argument—crafted by friends to raise funds for his postgraduate research—that his education was a good investment:

- ♦ PhD graduate: 1
- ♦ Number of years teaching at the seminary level: 30
- ♦ Number of new students each year: 50
- ♦ Number of congregations served in a pastor’s lifetime: 5
- ♦ Average congregation size: 150
- ♦ Number of congregants potentially influenced by one PhD graduate: 1,125,000¹

And that’s not even to mention the potential influence through preparation of future faculty members.

Compare that to the statistics revealed in “The Ten Awful Truths about Book Publishing”:

- ♦ In the Anglo-American world, 680,000 new books were published in 2008.
- ♦ Book sales are declining, despite the expanding number of books and products available.
- ♦ In 2004, of the 1.2 million books that are tracked, 950,000 sold 99 copies or fewer. Another 200,000 sold fewer than 1,000 copies.
- ♦ A book has less than a 1-percent chance of being stocked in an average bookstore.
- ♦ Today, most books are sold *only* to an author’s or a publisher’s “community.”²

As Green assesses the researcher’s leveraging power in a broadly defined community of influence, he says, “I can hope that my book sells ninety-nine copies this year, or I can influence 1.125 million congregants over the lifetime of my work.”³

ENDNOTES

1. Joel B. Green, “Crafting Research in the Service of Theological Education,” *Theological Education* 46, no. 1 (2010): 8–9.
2. Steve Piersanti, “The Ten Awful Truths about Book Publishing,” <http://www.scribd.com/doc/18073453/Ten-Awful-Truths-About-Book-Publishing-by-Steve-Piersanti-609-Update>. Quoted in Green.
3. Green, “Crafting Research,” 9.