

Feb 3-5, 2012: IARF US Chapter Conference Notes, by Srinivas Kota

Early Friday morning before sunrise, Doris and myself set out from Cambridge, Massachusetts. We missed our original flight, but got on to the very next one flying into Charlotte, North Carolina and then into Hilton Head, South Carolina. We boarded a cab at the Hilton Head airport and on our way to the Conference Center at Omni Resorts the driver gave us some insights into life at Hilton Head - golf, tourists and resorts. We entered Omni in time for our 3:00 pm board meeting. We went into the meeting with our lunches in hand. Hal French chaired the session, gave details of the planning process for the Conference and the other board members advised on their respective portfolios. Among several initiatives and decisions taken, the board unanimously selected Eric Cherry as the recipient of the 2012 IARF award.

Participants poured in during the Reception that followed. I got to meet some of them right away and I was immediately struck by the diversity of the group. After satisfying our taste buds, we marched into the adjacent hall for our first round of Circle Group discussions. The participants were divided into 4 groups. I had 7 people in my group - the smallest of the four. I took on the responsibility to lead our group's discussion. It provided me a fantastic opportunity to understand the group members' outlooks, interests, activities and expectations from the conference and IARF. It also provided me a stage to set the right expectations for the conference.

The opening worship service followed, led by Katherine King. The service was very well attended. We had to scramble to get more chairs for participants filling into the hall. Prayer services were led by distinguished leaders from a vast cross-section of society representing different religions and faith traditions. This was accompanied by candle lighting and silence. An out-of-the-box, delightful singing performance¹ by the 'Cocktails' - a high school, all girls troupe - followed the prayer service. The performance brought the mood of the Conference alive and the troupe was delighted that they could share their gift with IARF. That wrapped a long but well spent day for me and I retired to my room while Hal hosted the participants at his Hospitality Suite.

I skipped the Saturday morning Yoga session. Participants later told me of the lovely experience they had under Sarah Corbett's guidance. I briefly popped in and out of the morning worship service led by Rev Nan White. Breakfast was weighing heavily on my mind and I went hunting for a vegetarian one. Almost everything they offered at the restaurant at Omni at least had eggs. I wouldn't budge and decided to go without a breakfast unless I got a completely vegetarian one. Seeing this, the lead chef offered to sauté some vegetables for me. I was thrilled. Seeing my delight, he poured his heart into it. Sautéed veggies with bread and tea - perfect breakfast! I then had to put my agencies to use in deciding between attending Roy Kaplan's "The Freedom to Believe and the Freedom to Hate: the Role of Religion in the 21st Century" and Jay Abernathy's "The Conflict between Identity and Tolerance: Interfaith Cooperation in a UU Context". I remembered hearing Roy a couple years back in Clearwater, Florida. That was reason enough to want to hear him again. At the same time, I had never heard Jay talk, so I wanted to hear what he had to say as well. Reading and re-reading the topics, I decided upon the latter. I don't know what I missed, but I definitely know what I gained. Jay emphasized why UU needed to strengthen its identity, why UU should not be afraid of taking sides on issues that concern society and

why UU should not hesitate in showing the door to its own people who do not conform to its principles. It was a bold stand. From the audience, Waleed El-Ansary gave a beautiful example of how the Hindus when playing chess used to stress on making good initial choices: choices have a hierarchical structure; good initial choices are key in setting up the game. Eric Cherry tried to bring home the point that identity is closely tied to purpose and therefore the need to evaluate identity through the prism of purpose. After a break peppered with delicious snacks, everyone proceeded to participate in Kay Lindhal's Sacred Listening workshop. Kay articulated the art, need and benefits of listening: listen to your partner, listen to your friend, listen to yourself; you get close to a person by listening her out; how to connect by listening; why you shouldn't be thinking about yourself when you're listening; why not to judge the speaker when listening to her; how listening differs from culture to culture. It was a beautiful, engaging session - something I can take beyond my religious circle. This I believe brought out the beauty of IARF's existence. We pride ourselves in championing and connecting to different forms of 'freedom'. I never imagined the 'freedom to listen' before Kay's workshop. It has added a new dimension to my life and personality. That brought us to lunch. Hilton Head is an island and Omni was right on the Oceanfront. I gave in to the temptation, sneaked out and found a friend wandering on the beach! It was glorious - I was the only one in a jacket on the beach!! The Business Meeting following lunch was a time for a slew of announcements. Among others, Hal's announcement that Eric Cherry was chosen by the IARF board as the recipient of the 2012 IARF award brought on a huge round of applause. Carl Evans highlighted the formation of IPSC while Chaudhry Sadiq updated us about the activities of PICNA - both forwarding the cause of religious freedom in their communities. These are marvelous initiatives championed by dedicated people.

We trooped into Waleed El-Ansary's talk post lunch. Waleed held the audience in rapt attention with his articulate scholarly talk. Waleed is as good a 'purist' as you will find. He covered vast ground effortlessly and leapt a better word, magically. He stressed on the importance of 'form': word become book and word become flesh being 2 forms. He justified the relationship between religion and civilization. He pointed out how religion could 'decay' into rationalism or magic. Soft drinks followed and I scrambled to get the projector and computer ready (with help from Hal and Eric) for the next session. Doris presented a delightful slideshow on IARF's work in India, courtesy Thomas Mathew. Doris stressed how the Indians and Americans were all part of the same IARF. The audience was amazed to see such fan following in a distant country. I was stunned to see the percentage of youth involved in these activities. Doris also pointed out how the youth cherished the certificates they received for their active participation in IARF's activities. Eric presented another slideshow on the international programs being conducted in various parts of the globe ranging from Africa to Asia to Europe. He brought home the advantages that these programs offered people. I appreciated the vast landscape ranging from Waleed's formalist approach to Doris and Eric's practical utilitarian initiatives. I could visualize the 2 ends of IARF in those post-lunch sessions. It was an enlightening experience. We split into Circle Group's for a second time to take stock of our progress. Participants had very interesting and encouraging ideas. Among other things, we talked about 'Truth'. It was a fascinating convergence of thoughts.

Eric drove Doris and me to the Low Country UUA church in Bluffton. We were received by an extraordinarily large congregation. They threw open a grand vegetarian reception to welcome us. The

treats were amazing and never-ending; their creativity with vegetarian dishes touched me. We heard Manuel Holland talk about efforts and challenges to preserve the Gullah/Geechee culture - a marvelous human endeavor. An enthralling exhibition of Gullah art² was on display and I got to indulge into every bit of it. We returned back to Hal's Hospitality Suite where Richard Kellaway showed us some of his Japanese slides. It was a wonderful way to end a long day. But some of us brave-hearts somehow found that extra bit of energy to wander to the beach and look up at the clear night skies. My joy knew no bounds.

I popped in and out of Sarah Corbett's Sunday morning Yoga session. After a quick-ish breakfast with Doris, Betsy and Jack, it was time for me to pull out my cameras again. Eric Cherry, Francie Markham and Orlanda Brugnola made an absorbing presentation of their efforts on different international causes. Eric's presentation again showed us the utility of IARF's initiatives across the globe. It showed us parts of ourselves we did not know about and it showed how people across the globe benefited from our work. Francie's presentation touched the audience's hearts: she talked passionately about project's she supports in Zimbabwe; the travel; the challenges; condition of the poor; their gratitude and the fruits of their work. Orlanda briefed us about her work with UN - an extremely important and visible role. Next, I could not wait to get into Hal's Meditation Sampler. Hal gave a little introduction about the techniques he would offer us to experience over the next hour. And before we knew, we were into it. Later, Hal sent me the sequence of samples we performed: The Tibetan bell, to quiet us; The Tibetan Buddhist mantra, "Om mane padme hum"; The zazen (sitting practice); The kinhin (walking meditation); The Soka Gakkai chant, "Nam Myoho Renge Kyo"; Tai chi exercises- 12 movements; Mudras: Namaste, invoking on behalf of someone (hands upraised together); opening (hands upraised, apart); receiving, with gratitude (hands crossed over chest); and sharing (hands extended outward); The Loving Kindness meditation from Southern Buddhism. Being a Yogi myself, I was awed by the richness of the samples - simple yet profound. I didn't want to finish yet; and we didn't. Lori and Ken Getz took over from Hal and continued in the same vein with some exquisite QiGong exercises. We all wanted more information and our 3 instructors obliged. By the time we finished (which was way over the 1 hour we had reserved), I felt centered deep within myself and was ready to begin my day anew. After a little break, we went into our Third Circle Group discussions. This being our last "private" group meeting, I wanted to do a "post-mortem" analysis of what the conference produced. The "results" were very encouraging. The participants felt that IARF had a great model; that we surpassed their expectations in our seminars and workshops; that we extend and play a much bigger role in bringing communities together; that we encourage more youth participation; that we invite speakers who have a fan-following among the youth; and finally that we allocate some "beach-time" in our schedule. Kate Morrison, one of Hal's students even suggested a few prominent names of well-known speakers in SC. I felt heavy parting with my circle group members one last time - it produced such a fascinating mix of ideas. We proceeded into Closing Worship to be led by Manuel Holland. I had my cameras ready when Doris reminded me of our flight. I was reluctant to leave, so I quickly snapped a few more photos. We said our silent byes (as the Closing Worship was still on) to our fellow participants and popped out. Lori drove us and Kay into the airport and we had some wonderful conversation on the way. I told Lori of how beautiful I found the island and the people and Lori shared her beautiful island experiences as well. When I heard the concept

of "island time" from her, I reassured myself (foolishly) that this may mean that I wouldn't miss another flight!! And we didn't.

References:

1. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OLu7BCFkK-Y&feature=youtu.be>
2. <http://home.iarfus.org/home/photo-album/photos-iarf-us-chapter-conference-hilton-head/>