

The Genius of Interfaith: Adopt, Adapt, Adept

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There's a fascinating story in the Bible about a building project down by the Jordan. One man was strenuously swinging an axe, when the axe-head fell off the handle into the river! "Alas," he exclaimed, "for it was borrowed!" The story has a happy ending, but for now I want to stay with the exclamation, "Alas, for it was borrowed!" Its value was enhanced; its loss was felt more deeply, because it was borrowed. Benjamin Franklin once counseled: "Neither a borrower or a lender be." That may have some wisdom financially, but we are all borrowers. This title is borrowed, from a good friend, the late Richard Walker, who used it in a guest lecture years ago in my class to describe Japan: The Japanese adopt; they have been called the world's greatest borrowers. They adapt what they have borrowed to what was already there. And they become more adept, often, than the persons from whom they originally borrowed.

All of these terms, I am claiming, make up the genius of interfaith. We borrow from other persons, that's the adopt phase. And we borrow from wonderfully colorful people! Did you go to the Centennial of the Parliament of Religions in Chicago in 1993? Or to the IARF conference in Kochi, India, a few years ago? You don't just come to those encounters, or this one, expecting to find reinforcement of what you already know; you expect to learn new things from these colorful people around you.

Play with me for a minute, and let me pass around a small kaleidoscope. It was given to me in May of this year by three interfaith friends in Hiroshima, Japan.

I love kaleidoscopes, and this special one says, "Made in Japan." And what a beautiful group of people I see when I focus on the changing gathering in front of me! These are the people we meet in interfaith circles. The kaleidoscope enhances their external beauty, which gives a clue, as you know, to the colorful, insightful persons that you have met in gatherings like this. This is the genius of interfaith; we borrow from such beautiful people! So, pass it around, look at the people around you (I'm letting you borrow it; if I'm lucky, I'll get it back!).

Pick up any serious academic book; it will have copious footnotes in most cases, acknowledging those from whom the writer has borrowed. The footnotes are often more interesting than the writer's insights! A favorite book of mine, Matthew Fox' *"Original Blessings*, reinforces his conclusions with abundant, fascinating footnotes. He borrows, as do we all. The Japanese have a wonderful word, *torukumo*, "to take over", which says it. It's the Buddhist teaching of emptiness, *sunyata*, which implies a radical openness, non-resistance to new insights. Drop your defenses, and assume a learning posture while you're here!

And then second, adapt. If you treasure the things that you borrow, you must also value what you have, who you are, originally! Matthew Fox, again, with his title, *Original Blessing*, which is much more helpful than original sin! I read a creedal statement once which said, "Man is inclined to evil and only evil, and that continually." I really doubt if you believe that. Let me illustrate: I attended a revival service with a friend some years back, and the physically impressive former football player evangelist was holding forth on the theme of human sin and depravity. And he told the story of a woman coming with her young son, a beautiful boy of about 8, following a service, in which she said, "Rev. Glass, I really have trouble with your

heavy emphasis on sin, when I look at my child.” And the evangelist related that he responded, “Woman, until you realize that both you and your son are dirty, rotten, filthy, stinking sinners, there’s no chance for you or your son to be saved.” Is that the good news? Would you try to raise your child by giving him or her that self-image? I doubt it, although many have felt it at times.

C.S. Lewis once acknowledged, before his conversion, that he saw within himself, “A zoo of lusts, a bedlam of appetites.” Perhaps it’s like the Apostle Paul, “Wretched man that I am; who can deliver me from this body of death?” Or Freud’s seeing the two imperious forces, the super-ego and the id, waging war on the almost impotent battlefield, the ego.

Now if that’s the case, and if you turn the kaleidoscope, with a couple of bends, inwards, with that view, you would have to re-spell it, with a c, collide-o-scope! “I am on collision course with myself!” Maybe you’ve felt that sometimes. But take the original spelling again, and see if you find a better self-image, maybe in part through what your interfaith contacts have given you. It’s like a conference I once attended, where the name tag said, “Hello, my name is,” and under your name, it exclaimed, “I am a magnificent human being.” And so you are! Can you claim that identity, if so, then you do not fear having your own identity blown away by borrowed insights in an interfaith gathering. You affirm who you are; you are confident that you will be enriched, not vanquished by what you learn from others.

And then the third word, adept. You become more adept in your spiritual life by the acquisition of truths that come through other packages. “Truth is one.” How many times have we heard that affirmation? I’ll teach my Honors course again this fall, “Learning Non-Violence from Gandhi and Friends.” Truth and Non-violence: from so many sources. Gandhi would say, “God is truth,” and he would reverse it, “Truth is God.” Truth is a universal, and we ought to expect to find it encapsulated in traditions other than the one into which I may have been born. We do not expect to try to explain it away, but to welcome it. Of course I’ll find truth here, from each of you I meet!

The first time I taught a course in World religions, I was told that my predecessor in that small Christian college would begin the study of each different tradition by saying, “Now we’ll see in what ways this religion is inferior to Christianity.” I was a novice, just beginning to explore the wisdom in each of the world’s religions, but I knew that I couldn’t approach them in this fashion.

And in adopting these truths in their different packages, adapting them to our own belief systems, how many of you would say that your spiritual practice has become more enhanced? How many of you would say that you have become more adept in your spiritual pursuits through interfaith activities?

You know that the title, Buddha, means, simply, “One who has awakened.” The original Gautama didn’t claim that property just for himself, but he asserted that each of us has the capacity for spiritual awakening. And in this conference, perhaps, we may experience, not just the single A that I might give to some of my exceptional students, but 4 As (!) through your acquisition of what is offered here. You can become alert, alive, aware, awake! That’s the promise of becoming a spiritual adept. And so you are.

Oh yes, I promised you earlier the ending of the Biblical story of the axe head that flew off the handle (sidenote: flying off the handle is always dangerous). This event occurred in the presence of the prophet Elisha, who recognized the consternation of the man who had lost the borrowed axe handle. As the story is told, Elisha had a special gift; he took a stick, swished it around in the water, and the iron axe head surfaced! That which was borrowed could be returned again! We borrow, we employ what we have borrowed, and we return it again, with gratitude. And maybe we loan something, also, to the borrower. It's reciprocal!

That simple truth: we learn from each other.