

INTERFAITH
HEROES



WRITTEN & EDITED BY
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BUTTRY

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Preface

Here's the good news: The worldwide interfaith movement is growing and deepening with each passing year. By that, first of all, I mean there is an ever-expanding interest in learning about other cultures and faiths around the world. Perhaps ironically, much of this curiosity is fueled by popular culture: music, movies, TV and especially digital culture that is now even larger than the Internet itself. For example, millions of young people now know that a red string is somehow related to the Jewish tradition of Kaballah, thanks to Madonna and other pop stars sporting red strings. These popular images we see of other faiths may be shallow or, worse yet, deeply flawed — but a healthy desire to explore world cultures is growing today.

Second, even Americans — who rank among the most religiously devout people in the world — have shed thick layers of bias toward people of other faiths and cultures. Racism and zealotry have not vanished, of course, but shoppers in their neighborhood Target stores now expect to see enormous signs for yoga gear. Although Americans continue to identify themselves as Christian in overwhelming numbers, millions now consider Eastern practices like yoga and meditation to be a natural part of daily life.

Third, we have done a terrific job of educating ourselves about tragic religious bigotry of the past. Although religious extremism still flares up in the U.S. and around the world,

it's also a fact that, as a nation, we have thoroughly educated ourselves about the Holocaust, the defining religious tragedy of modern history. As recently as the 1970s, high school classrooms in the U.S. barely included references to this dark chapter in world conflict. Now, students and adults are immersed in Holocaust-related stories and educational opportunities. As a result, millions of Americans also understand the serious nature of genocides in Eastern Europe, Rwanda and Sudan as well. Sadly, we have not eliminated genocide, which often has religious roots, nor have we responded effectively in many cases to ethnic cleansing around our troubled planet. But millions of Americans now do understand the need to protect and save minorities in a way that we did not even half a century ago.

Fourth, although religious leaders around the world still have a long way to go in making peace between themselves — let alone peace between government leaders — it also is true that enormous steps have been taken by prophetic world leaders, including Pope John Paul II and so many others you will read about in this book. That is not to say that a leader like John Paul II, who balanced his interfaith inclusivity with sharp-edged enforcement of many doctrinal boundaries during his reign, should be embraced as correct in every judgment. We want you to know that many heroes you will meet in this book had flaws and limitations as well as great insights for all of humanity.

That is the major step author Dan Buttry has taken in Volume 2 of his book. This is not merely another collection of inspiring profiles, following on the 31 uplifting portraits of heroes in Volume 1. Rather, in this new book Dan explores the growth, the sophistication and the diversity of approaches unfolding around the world.

We need this kind of spiritual connection now more than ever. Forces of extremism also are hardening their pockets of “true believers” in many corners of the world — even in corners of our American homeland. No faith is immune to this problem.

While we all can celebrate larger-than-life heroes like Gandhi and Martin Luther King Jr., our turbulent times demand that

all of us take first steps. As the worldwide interfaith movement expands, there are many pathways those first steps may trod.

Enjoy Volume 2 as a soul-stirring sourcebook that continues the inspiration of Volume 1 and now helps us to clarify our next steps as we continue to follow the examples of our heroes.

— *David Crumm, founding Editor of www.ReadTheSpirit.com*

Introduction

Throughout human history, people have encountered each other across religious boundaries. Sometimes those encounters have been filled with curiosity, with one or both groups exploring what they can learn from the other. Sometimes those encounters have been filled with suspicion. Those who had different ideas and rituals were viewed as a threat, and in some cases one or both groups acted with violence toward the other. Sometimes those encounters were met with bland indifference expressed in a live-and-let-live toleration.

In the 20th Century, the scientific Western World saw philosophers and even theologians proclaiming the “death of God.” Religion seemed pushed to the edges of life with the spectacular growth of science and the rapid development of materialist consumer society with all its benefits. But also in that century, two world wars and the nuclear arms race showed the depths of moral depravity into which humanity could plunge and took us to the brink of extinction. In many cultures, there was an awakening of religious interest and fervor. Sometimes that passion has been expressed in extremist, exclusivist and even violent forms. But the religious ferment also has nurtured more cooperation among religious leaders than at any time in history. The shrinking of the planet through communications and travel have enabled people of diverse faiths to connect regularly, learn from each other and work together on global

concerns. The 21st Century is beginning with religion as a major theme in news and other media, almost daily. Religion is shaping our politics, our international affairs and our local neighborhood relationships. Religion is haunting our dreams and spurring our hopes.

As an active participant in Interfaith Partners in Detroit (see chapter 50) I started exploring the role models in history for our interfaith cooperation. I began with the names of some people I had known—Gandhi, King, St. Francis, Roger Williams—then asked my friends in Interfaith Partners about people they knew. They referred me to King Negus, Moses Montefiore, Moussa Al-Sadr and Satguru Sivaya Subramuniyaswami—people I'd never heard of. I started putting together little biographical sketches of these folks to inspire us and guide our thinking, calling them interfaith “saints,” using a Christian term, which we eventually changed to “heroes” to communicate this idea more clearly across many cultures. I stumbled across interfaith dimensions of people I knew well in other contexts, such as Howard Thurman and Fritz Eichenberg. Eventually there seemed enough for a booklet, but as I shared it with the Interfaith Partners network the response was so eager and overwhelming that people insisted that this project needed to be shared far more broadly than with just our local network. David Crumm, at that time the religion editor of the *Detroit Free Press* and coordinator of the new *ReadTheSpirit* web network offered to publish the stories as a book. Thus was born *Interfaith Heroes* in January 2008.

David suggested that we declare January as “Interfaith Heroes Month” since it coincided with both the time we were ready to release the book and also featured the national holiday for one of our main interfaith heroes, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Besides publishing the book, David released one heroic story each day during January on the *ReadTheSpirit* website (www.ReadTheSpirit.com). Various friends of different religions were asked to write a response each day to the featured story. A blog was set up on *ReadTheSpirit* for readers to respond and to nominate other interfaith heroes.

We had left out a few people to make the initial book come out even with the 31 days of January. That started us thinking about a second volume. As visitors to the website submitted their nominations and I delved into research of my own, the list of additional heroes seemed to explode. There were so many people working in so many courageous and creative ways. Some were people I'd heard about but didn't know their interfaith activities. Others were people I had never known, especially those from other religious traditions. The giants in the eyes of some of my friends were people I'd never heard of, which illustrates some of the ignorance we have when we stay exclusively within the confines of our own religious communities.

So this time as I got to work on volume 2 on the Interfaith Heroes project I had a broader audience in mind as well as a more comprehensive vision for the interfaith movement around the world. Rather than merely duplicating the first volume with a string-of-pearls approach to the biographical sketches, I decided to cluster the heroes in topical sections that I'd already discerned as I was working through the earlier book. Each person seemed to have particular strengths within interfaith relationships, whether those strengths were in building relationships with people of other religions, learning from people of other traditions, providing refuge in times of danger and crisis, or working across religious lines for common concerns of justice and peace. As I gathered the heroes around each topic I realized that an opening chapter for each section would clarify each issue, help tie together the heroes of the two books, and allow the inclusion of other heroes and interfaith stories that might not work so well as a stand-alone biography. This approach also makes the adventure more compelling. Now, the two books work together on new levels. For example, if you're looking for a more detailed guide for action or further resources, turn to the first volume of *Interfaith Heroes*. We did not duplicate that in this volume.

At times in this project I found myself having to go outside my own comfort zone. I am a Christian and a passionate believer in Christ. Some of the heroes who are superb illustrations of various types of interfaith activity are also people with whom I disagree, even about the nature of interfaith relationships. We have different approaches to this work and even different concepts about the appropriate framework for such relationships. Rather than ignore such issues, I found it more helpful to note some of these issues both in the text and in the discussion questions. If we are going to build a more stable, cohesive and harmonious world coming from the diverse range of our religious traditions, then we will have to have a deeper understanding and greater honesty than has been practiced in many of our interfaith settings. We've often been acting like suitors on their first date, putting our best selves forward and avoiding the tough questions that might jeopardize the relationship in its fragile early stages. These heroes, those with whom I identify and those who are not so akin to my way of thinking, all challenge me to go deeper and to take the risks of building more real and substantial relationships with people from other faith communities. I trust that you as a reader of this book also will be stimulated and challenged to journey further with your agreements and disagreements.

Interfaith Heroes has been an interfaith community project. Many friends have suggested names, given me leads and provided research material. Others have read the manuscript and provided editorial suggestions and ideas that have enriched the final product. Special thanks go to Brenda Rosenberg, Padma Kuppa, Sheri Schiff, Bob Brutell, Eide Alawan, Victor Begg, Steve Spreitzer, Daniel Appleyard, Michael Hovey, Barbara Talley, Gail Katz, Barbara Clevinger, Ma'sood Cajee and Ken Sehested. Special thanks go to all those who nominated heroes on the website, whether the heroes ended up in chapters of this book or not. Thanks also go to three heroes with whom I was in direct contact during the writing phase: David Rosen, A.T. Ariyaratne and Shanta Premawardhana. David Crumm

Media has played a huge role in inspiring the effort, editing the manuscript and publishing and marketing the book. David and ReadTheSpirit Publisher John Hile have managed the website, passed on nominations of heroes and been a constant source of encouragement and affirmation. I especially thank my wife Sharon Buttry, an interfaith partner and leader in her own right, who has both enthusiastically and thoughtfully shared this journey and encouraged me in my writing.

In the first *Interfaith Heroes* book we thought it wise to focus just on historical figures, or as we put it in our irreverent shorthand, “dead people.” But the living heroes cry out for attention, not personally but by the power of their witness and example. Some of the nominees from the website were living people, and we also discovered so many exciting things happening around the globe that needed to be pulled together in this context of identifying our interfaith heroes. I was introduced to one of the heroes in this book by one of our Interfaith Partners, Barbara Talley. Barbara directs a peace center for the Methodist district in her part of Metro Detroit, and she had sponsored an evening event with A.T. Ariyaratne from Sri Lanka during his recent tour of the United States. As “Dr. Ari” and I were chatting before the sessions, I asked him to teach me the greeting in his native Sinhala language. He said, “Ayubowan. It means: May you live long.” What a delightful greeting, I thought, and perfect for me to use with this elderly man who has made such a huge impact for peace in Sri Lanka and around the world.

So we offer to all the interfaith heroes in this book who are still alive and inspire us by their work: “May you live long—Ayubowan!”

And to you — reading this page right now — may you find inspiration to become an interfaith hero yourself. And, “May you live long—Ayubowan!”

Interfaith Relationships

“A Priest, a Minister and a Rabbi walked into ...”

In the fall of 1933 the “Tolerance Trio” toured the United States. They traveled more than 9,000 miles, appearing before 129 audiences in 38 cities. The “Tolerance Trio” was not a music group introducing a new type of jazz, though they did employ an almost Vaudeville style in their rapid and often humorous interactions. They were a Protestant minister, a Catholic priest and a Jewish rabbi. This sounds like the start of a bad joke, but it was actually the start of a dynamic educational program of the newly formed National Conference of Christians and Jews (NCCJ). The trio asked each other the questions that everyone had but were afraid to say to the face of a person of the other religion: Questions about the Pope in American politics, Jewish control of the movie industry, and Protestant views on everyone else going to Hell. Together, they opened discussions between religious communities, dispelled stereotypes and gave expression to friendships that could bind people together from different religious faiths.

The National Conference of Christians and Jews (NCCJ) was established in 1927 after the Federal Council of Churches invited representatives from Jewish and Catholic groups to join in social justice and research projects. These interactions

spurred further dialogue that culminated in the formation of NCCJ. NCCJ was jointly chaired by a trio drawn one each from the Jewish, Catholic and Protestant communities. Interestingly, one of the early Jewish leaders of NCCJ was Roger Williams Strauss, named after the Baptist minister who was a champion of religious liberty in founding Rhode Island and who welcomed the establishment of the second Jewish synagogue in America (Roger Williams is included in the first *Interfaith Heroes* book). NCCJ was officially renamed as the National Conference for Community and Justice in the 1990s to reflect the expanding nature of its interfaith constituency. It grew to more than 55 regional offices in 32 states working on the mission of building “whole and inclusive communities” through interfaith dialogues, anti-discrimination education and training programs for communities and workplaces, and advocacy about civil rights in areas of public policy.

NCCJ was born out of the vision and persistence of interfaith pioneers in the United States. That initial network of Jews, Catholics and Protestants had to be intentional in their efforts, because the work demanded that these already well-educated men and women explore new areas of religious scholarship. Meanwhile, they were aware of the potential for interreligious conflict. The pioneers knew that their approach across the religious boundaries might be misunderstood, misinterpreted and even deliberately distorted. In the early days of NCCJ’s work, some Jews feared that the Protestants had a hidden missionary agenda, hoping to convert them. The Christians worried that the Jews were involved in interfaith activity to try to establish a new universal religion. Through deliberate intention and good will these interfaith heroes in the 1920s and 1930s fleshed out a vision of healthy interaction between the religious communities.

Building relationships with people of other faiths has been a risky venture for many years. Anti-Semitism was particularly virulent in the U.S. during the 1920s, when the Ku Klux Klan was growing nationwide, emphasizing a racist, anti-Catholic

and anti-Semitic creed. The Klan ran a candidate for mayor of Detroit in 1925 who was narrowly kept out of office. The famously forged *Protocols of the Elders of Zion* trumpeted an alleged worldwide Jewish conspiracy, a document that still makes the rounds in hate groups. NCCJ and the Tolerance Trio waded into the turbulence of the social turmoil of that period with a very different message, a message of positive religious relationships and of working together as diverse religious communities to address common problems of industrialization, urbanization and international peace.

How steep are the risks? In some instances, religious conflict can help spark open warfare. Usually, conflicts are not that simplistic. In most cases, conflicts are due more to injustice, to the imbalance of political and economic power between the “haves” and the “have nots,” than to particular religious issues. But, as a conflict rages, religious difference often is an easily recognizable trait, much like race, ethnicity or language, and religious affiliation becomes a short-hand way of referring to the opposing sides. Some interfaith heroes have been especially bold in forming relationships across not just lines of division, but actual battle-lines. The relationship between Francis of Assisi and Sultan Al-Malik Al-Kamil during the Crusades (featured in *Interfaith Heroes*) was a bright moment of hope in a violent chapter of human history. Though their impact on the fighting was minimal, they established a friendship and learned from each other. Today there are people of different faiths finding each other and building relationships even though the larger communities are in open war with each other.

Risks also arise within one’s own religious community. Co-religionists may fear the watering down of their own religion through contact with others. They may fear losing their control over what a community defines as correct belief or correct practice. The loss of control can be political as well. In such cases, people who reach out across the lines of division can provoke strong resistance from within their particular religious community. Many interfaith heroes faced their worst attacks

from within their own religious communities. Mahatma Gandhi was assassinated by a militant Hindu nationalist. Abdul Ghaffar Khan spent most of his later years in a Pakistani prison because of his vision that Muslims and Hindus could live together. Imam Moussa Al-Sadr disappeared during the Lebanese civil war not at the hand of opposing religious militias but on a peace mission to Libya. Roger Williams was banished from Massachusetts by Christians. Etty Hillesum was criticized as sounding “too Christian” by fellow Jews for talking about loving enemies. (See *Interfaith Heroes* for more on these people.) Risking the ire and even the sanction of one’s own religious community is a common experience of interfaith heroes. That’s one reason we call them heroes.

The primary work of some of these heroes was building these risky relationships. At the close of the 19th Century, the World’s Congress of Religions was held at the World’s Columbian Exposition in Chicago. Speakers at that 1893 meeting included leaders from the various streams within Christianity (Protestant, Catholic, Orthodox), Jews, Buddhists, a Muslim, a Confucian, a Zoroastrian, a Shinto and a Hindu. (Henrietta Szold, featured in *Interfaith Heroes*, was one of the Jewish speakers.)

As we enter the 21st Century there are now many networks and organizations from the local to the global level that link people of various faiths. Some of these groups are task-oriented, focused on meeting a commonly embraced human need or jointly advocating for human or civil rights. Other groups are centered on the relationships themselves, particularly on engaging in dialogue to understand and appreciate one another. Some groups provide opportunities for people from many faiths to interact; others focus on relationships between two or three faiths. In 2007, 138 Muslim scholars from 40 countries produced *A Common Word Between You and Us* to initiate dialogue between Muslim and Christian leaders for the sake of peace. Some responses from Christian leaders were very positive, while other responses from the general Christian community reflected

the mistrust, animosity and misunderstanding that plague many interfaith relationships. Follow-up efforts to “A Common Word” are ongoing.

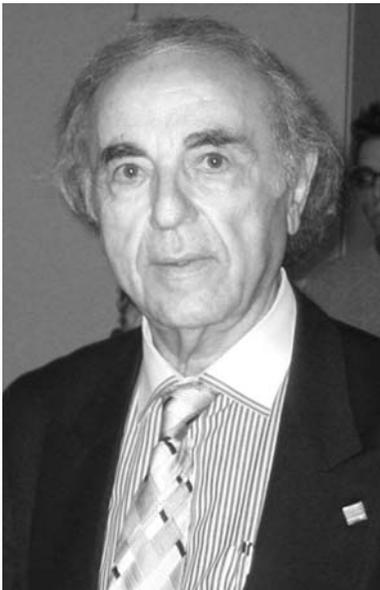
The interfaith heroes in this section all took special steps in forging relationships with people of different religions. Their overall work may have had many dimensions, but for the following heroes relationships were pivotal.

Baruch Tenenbaum

(b. 1933)

The agreement is based on respect, the knowledge and understanding of our rights that each one of us can be different from the other.

Baruch Tenenbaum was born in Sante Fe, Argentina, a settlement for Jewish immigrants fleeing the violence of Russian pogroms in the late 19th Century. A son of Jewish-Argentine cowboys—*gauchos*—he entered academia,



teaching the Hebrew and Yiddish languages, Yiddish literature, the Hebrew Scriptures and philosophy. He also became a businessman, establishing the Israeli Tourist Office in Buenos Aires.

A central passion to Tenenbaum's life has been Jewish-Christian relationships, particularly relationships between Jews and the Catholic Church. He used his position as a travel agent to organize a group of Argentine Catholic priests

to visit the Holy Land. Out of that trip, working with his friends among Catholic clergy and other businesspeople, Tenenbaum helped establish the *Casa Argentina en Jerusalem* which hosted opportunities for Catholics and Jews to get together and learn from each other. Tenenbaum then decided to move from working with the priests to inviting the pope to visit Israel. During a visit to the Vatican in 1965, Tenenbaum personally invited Pope Paul VI to visit Jerusalem, which resulted in the first such visit to that holy city by a pope.

Tenenbaum promoted the idea of establishing interfaith monuments. His first major project was the commissioning of a fresco by the Argentine painter Raul Soldi in the main church in Nazareth, which was finished in 1968 and has been seen by more than 10 million people. He also organized the production of a memorial mural dedicated to victims of the Holocaust in the Buenos Aires Cathedral. In April 1997 the mural, containing Jewish religious texts, was unveiled by the Cardinal of Argentina, Antonio Quarracino, Polish Nobel Peace Prize winner Lech Walesa and Tenenbaum. A replica of the mural was made in the Vatunrunser Church in Berlin.

Tenenbaum's interfaith work ended up putting his life at risk. A terrorist group associated with the Argentine military dictatorship kidnapped him in 1976. They accused him of "infecting the Catholic Church with the virus of Judaism" and "of spreading ideas of alleged coexistence so as to destroy Christian principles." When his wife Perla volunteered to be a hostage, she was kidnapped as well. Eventually they were released in large part due to the mediation and advocacy efforts of a Catholic priest, Father Horacio Moreno.

Following the kidnapping, Tenenbaum left Argentina for the U.S. He sought out Gentiles who had helped Jews during the Holocaust. With the help of Congressman Tom Lantos, a Holocaust survivor, he founded The International Raoul Wallenberg Foundation to promote the life and work of Raoul Wallenberg. Wallenberg was a Swedish diplomat stationed in Hungary who saved almost 100,000 Jews from deportation to

the death camps. Wallenberg was seized by the Soviet Army at the end of the war, and he was never seen again. Tenenbaum established the Wallenberg Foundation to fight intolerance, racism and violence and to stimulate the courage to defend the weak against aggression and violence. More than 60 heads of state and 30 Nobel Prize laureates are members of the Wallenberg Foundation. One of the stories highlighted by the foundation is that of Irena Sendler (see Chapter 32).

Tenenbaum has continued to work on issues of interfaith dialogue and reconciliation. He sees fear as the fuel that touches off crimes of religious violence. Getting to know someone enables people to let go of their fears, about which Tenenbaum said, “This simple and basic principle is the main base of the interconfessional dialogue.” His perspective on interfaith dialogue and relationships was not to find the lowest common denominator between faiths or to simply tolerate people who were different. He said, “The agreement is not about faith or theological beliefs. Each of us will continue sticking to his or her faith, and his or her source of inspiration. The agreement is based on respect, the knowledge and understanding of our rights that each one of us can be different from the other.”