Acts of Faith
The Story of an American Muslim, the Struggle for the Soul of a Generation
Eboo Patel

"A beautifully written story of discovery and hope."
—President Bill Clinton
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Introduction: The Faith Line

Someone who doesn’t make flowers makes thorns.
If you’re not building rooms where wisdom can be openly spoken, you’re building a prison.

SHAMS OF TABBIZ

Eric Rudolph is in court pleading guilty. But he is not sorry. Not for the radio-controlled nail bomb that he detonated at New Woman All Women Health Care in Birmingham, Alabama, that killed an off-duty police officer and left a nurse hobbléd and half-blind. Not for the bomb at the 1996 Olympics in Atlanta that killed one, injured dozens, and sent shock waves of fear through the global community. Not for his hate-sputtering letter stating, “We declare and will wage total war on the ungodly communist regime in New York and your legislative bureaucratic lackeys in Washington,” signed “the Army of God.” Not for defiling the Holy Bible by writing “bomb” in the margin of his copy.

In fact, Rudolph is proud and defiant. He lectures the judge on the righteousness of his actions. He gloats as he recalls federal agents passing within steps of his hiding place. He unabashedly states that abortion, homosexuality, and all hints of “global socialism” still need to be “ruthlessly opposed.” He does this in the name of Christianity, quot-
ing from the New Testament: “I have fought the good fight, I have finished my course, I have kept the faith.”

Felicia Sanderson lost her husband, Robert, a police officer, to Rudolph’s Birmingham bomb. During the sentencing hearing, she played a tape of speeches made at her husband’s funeral. People remembered him keeping candy for children in his patrol car and raising money to replace Christmas gifts for a family whose home had been robbed. Felicia Sanderson pointed to Rudolph and told the court, “He has been responsible for every tear my sons have shed.”

Judge C. Lynwood Smith sentenced Rudolph to two life terms, compared him to the Nazis, and said that he was shocked at Rudolph’s lack of remorse. But many others felt a twinge of pride.

Eric Rudolph might have been a loner, but he did not act alone. He was produced by a movement and encouraged by a culture. In the woods of western North Carolina, where Rudolph evaded federal agents for five years, people cheered him on, helped him hide, made T-shirts that said RUN RUDOLPH RUN. The day he was finally caught, a woman from the area was quoted as saying, “Rudolph’s a Christian and I’m a Christian … Those are our values. These are our woods.”

Of all the information published about Rudolph, one sentence in particular stood out to me: Rudolph wrote an essay denying the Holocaust when he was in high school. How does a teenager come to hold such a view?

The answer is simple: people taught him. Eric Rudolph had always had trouble in school—fights, truancy. He never quite fit in. His father died when he was young. His mother met and followed a series of dangerous iconoclasts who preached a theology of hate. The first was Tom Branham, who encouraged the Rudolph family to move next door to him in Topton, North Carolina. Eric was soon drawing Nazi symbols in his schoolbooks at nearby Nantahala High School. Next, Eric’s mother moved the family to Schell City, Missouri, to be near Dan Gayman, a leading figure in the extremist Christian Identity movement. Gayman had been a high school principal and knew how to make his mark on young people. He assumed a fatherly relationship with Eric, enrolled him in Christian Identity youth programs, and made sure he read the literature of the movement. Gayman taught Eric that the Bible was the history of Aryan whites and that Jews were the spawn of Satan and part of a tribe called the “the mud people.” The world was nearing a final struggle between God’s people and Satan’s servants, and it was up to the “conscious” Aryans to ensure victory for the right race. Eric took to calling the television “the Electric Jew.” He carved swastikas into his mother’s living room furniture. His library included vitriolically anti-Semitic publications such as The Protocols of the Learned Elders of Zion, Anne Frank’s Diary: A Hoax, and The International Jew. Under the tutelage of Gayman and other radical preachers, Eric Rudolph’s hate did what hate always does: it spread.

I imagine these preachers felt a surge of pride when Rudolph responded to Judge Smith’s question about whether he set off the bomb in Birmingham with a snarl, “I certainly did.”

Middle school students in Whitwell, Tennessee, are giving tours of one of the most profound Holocaust memorials anywhere in the world: a German railcar that was used to transport Jews to Auschwitz. The young people ask guests to imagine how it might feel to be one of the seventy or eighty Jews packed into that tight space, hearing the wheels clanking as the train took them to torture and death. They explain that the railcar is filled with millions of paper clips, each one a symbol of a Jew murdered by the Nazis. One student says that to see a paper clip now is to think of a soul. The sign at the entrance of the memorial reads: “We ask you to pause and reflect on the evil of intolerance and hatred.” The sign on the way out states: “What can I do to spread the message of love and tolerance these children have demonstrated with this memorial?”

One Whitwell student tour guide, about to graduate from eighth grade, reflects, “In the future, when I come back and see it, knowing that I was here to do this, it will not be just a memory, but kind of like in your heart, that you’ve changed the way that people think about other people.”
Whitwell is a town of fewer than two thousand residents, located outside Chattanooga in the coal mining region of southeastern Tennessee, about a hundred miles from where the Ku Klux Klan was born. It has two traffic lights and a whole lot of God bless America signs. The mines closed thirty years ago, leaving the region even poorer than it was before. You can count the number of black and Latino families in Whitwell on two hands, and you won’t need any of those fingers to count the number of Catholics, Jews, and Muslims, because there aren’t any.

Why would white Protestant kids in a poor region with a history of prejudice care so much about educating people about Judaism? The answer is simple: people taught them. The principal of Whitwell Middle School, Linda Hooper, wanted the students in her school to learn about cultures and people who are different from themselves. “Our children, they are respectful; they are thoughtful; they are caring. But they are pretty much homogeneous. When we come up to someone who is not like us, we don’t have a clue.”

She sent a teacher to a diversity conference, and he came back with the idea of a Holocaust education project. “This was our need,” Hooper said.

Over the next several years, the students at Whitwell studied that horrible time, met with Holocaust survivors, learned about the rich tradition of Judaism, and taught all the people they touched about the powerful role that young people can play in advocating for pluralism.

Lena Gitter, a ninety-five-year-old Holocaust survivor, heard about the project and wrote the students a letter: “I witnessed what intolerance and indifference can lead to. I am thankful that late in life I can see and hear that the teaching of tolerance is alive and well and bears fruit. When you ask the young, they will do the right thing. With tears in my eyes, I bow my head before you. Shalom.”

Eric Rudolph and the young people of Whitwell are two very different responses to one of the most important questions of our time: in a world of passionate religiosity and intense interaction, how will people from different faith backgrounds engage one another? Rudolph responded to people who were different by building bombs of destruction. The students of Whitwell responded to diversity by building bridges of understanding. Rudolph is a religious totalitarian. The students of Whitwell are religious pluralists. They are on different sides of the faith line.

One hundred years ago, the great African American scholar W. E. B. Du Bois famously said, “The problem of the twentieth century is the problem of the color line.” I believe that the twenty-first century will be shaped by the question of the faith line. On one side of the faith line are the religious totalitarians. Their conviction is that only one interpretation of one religion is a legitimate way of being, believing, and belonging on earth. Everyone else needs to be cowed, converted, or condemned, or killed. On the other side of the faith line are the religious pluralists, who hold that people believing in different creeds and belonging to different communities need to learn to live together. Religious pluralism is neither mere coexistence nor forced consensus. It is a form of proactive cooperation that affirms the identity of the constituent communities while emphasizing that the well-being of each and all depends on the health of the whole. It is the belief that the common good is best served when each community has a chance to make its unique contribution.

Religious totalitarians have the unique advantage of being able to oppose each other and work together at the same time. Osama bin Laden says that Christians are out to destroy Muslims. Pat Robertson says that Muslims want only to dominate Christians. Bin Laden points to Pat Robertson as evidence of his case. Robertson points to bin Laden as proof of his. Bin Laden says he is moving Muslims to his side of the faith line. Robertson claims he is moving Christians to his. But if you look from a certain angle, you see that they are not on opposite sides at all. They are right next to each other, standing shoulder to shoulder, a most unlikely pair, two totalitarians working collectively against the dream of a common life together.

The outcome of the question of the faith line depends on which
side young people choose. Young people have always played a key role in social movements, from the struggle against apartheid in South Africa to the rise of the Nazi Party in Germany. We live in an era where the populations of the most religiously volatile areas of the world are strikingly young. Seventy-five percent of India’s one billion plus are not yet twenty-five. Eighty-five percent of the people who live in the Palestinian territories are under age thirty-three. More than two-thirds of the people of Iran are under age thirty. The median age in Iraq is nineteen and a half. All of these people are standing on the faith line. Whose message are they hearing?

Watching Paper Clips, the documentary film made about the Whitwell students, I could not help but wonder: What if Linda Hooper had gotten to Eric Rudolph before Dan Gayman did? What if Rudolph had attended the First United Methodist Church in Whitwell, which hosted the events for the Holocaust project, instead of Christian Identity youth programs, had helped collect paper clips with the other kids at Whitwell Middle School instead of studying with bigots, had read Anne Frank: The Diary of a Young Girl instead of Anne Frank’s Diary: A Hoax? Eric Rudolph the religious terrorist was not inevitable, just as the teenage bridge builders of Whitwell were not. They were each carefully and intentionally nurtured.

This is a book about how some young people become champions of religious pluralism while others become the foot soldiers of religious totalitarianism. Its thesis is simple: influences matter, programs count, mentors make a difference, institutions leave their mark. When we look back in the lives of young religious terrorists, we find a web of individuals and organizations that shaped them. These young killers are not, for the most part, dramatically deranged individuals. They are kids who fell into murderously manipulative hands. Every time we see a teenager kill someone in the name of God, we should picture a pair of shadowy hands behind him, showing him how to make the bomb or point the gun, giving him a manual with the prayers to say while committing murder, steadying his shaking hands with callused, steely ones, blessing him as he resolves to do the deed. And then we should ask: why weren’t the hands of people who care about pluralism shaping that kid instead of the hands of religious totalitarians?

Religious extremism is a movement of young people taking action. Hindu nationalists, hate-filled rabbis, Christian Identity preachers, and Muslim totalitarians prey on young people’s desire to have a clear identity and make a powerful impact. We see their successes in the headlines of our newspapers every day.

Interfaith cooperation is too often a conference of senior religious leaders talking. No doubt these leaders play a crucial role in religious bridge building. They have broken important theological ground, articulated frameworks for interfaith understanding, and sent the signal that cooperation with the religious Other is not only possible but necessary. Yet few in my generation have been involved.

I am an American Muslim from India. My adolescence was a series of rejections, one after another, of the various dimensions of my heritage, in the belief that America, India, and Islam could not coexist within the same being. If I wanted to be one, I could not be the others. My struggle to understand the traditions I belong to as mutually enriching rather than mutually exclusive is the story of a generation of young people standing at the crossroads of inheritance and discovery, trying to look both ways at once. There is a strong connection between finding a sense of inner coherence and developing a commitment to pluralism. And that has everything to do with who meets you at the crossroads.

When I was in college, I had the sudden realization that all of my heroes were people of deep faith: Dorothy Day, the Dalai Lama, Martin Luther King Jr., Mahatma Gandhi, Malcolm X, the Aga Khan. Moreover, they were all of different faiths. A little more research revealed two additional insights. First, religious cooperation had been central to the work of most of these faith heroes. The Reverend Martin Luther King Jr. partnered with Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel in the struggle for civil rights. Mahatma Gandhi stated that Hindu-
Muslim unity was just as important to him as a free India. Second, each of my faith heroes assumed an important leadership role at a young age. King was only twenty-six years old when he led the Montgomery bus boycott. Gandhi was even younger when he started his movement against unjust laws in early-twentieth-century South Africa.

I attended my first interfaith conference when I was twenty-one and discovered that I was the youngest person there by some thirty years. The more conferences I went to, the more I found that general pattern held true. I could not help but reflect upon the young King in Montgomery or the young Gandhi in Johannesburg. I knew my generation had faith heroes of courage and vision. Why weren't they more visibly involved in the crucial project of building religious pluralism, resurrecting the tradition of Gandhi and King in a global era characterized by religious conflict? The faces of religious fanatics were young; the faces of interfaith cooperation were old. Something had to change.

Change happens internally before it takes place in the world. My transformation was catalyzed by a moment of failure.

In high school, the group I ate lunch with included a Cuban Jew, a Nigerian Evangelical, and an Indian Hindu. We were all devout to a degree, but we almost never talked about our religions with one another. Often somebody would announce at the table that he couldn't eat a certain kind of food, or any food at all, for a period of time. We all knew religion hovered behind this, but nobody ever offered any explanation deeper than “my mom said,” and nobody ever asked for one.

This silent pact relieved all of us. We were not equipped with a language that allowed us to explain our faith to others or to ask about anyone else’s. Back then, I thought little about the dangers lurking within this absence.

A few years after we graduated, my Jewish friend reminded me of a dark time during our adolescence. There were a group of kids in our high school who, for several weeks, took up scrawling anti-Semitic slurs on classroom desks and making obscene statements about Jews in the hallways. I did not confront them. I did not comfort my Jewish friend. I knew little about what Judaism meant to him, less about the emotional effects of anti-Semitism, and next to nothing about how to stop religious bigotry. So I averted my eyes and avoided my friend, because I couldn't stand to face him.

A few years later, he described to me the fear he had experienced coming to school those days, and his utter loneliness as he had watched his close friends simply stand by. Hearing him recount his suffering and my complicity is the single most humiliating experience of my life. I did not know it in high school, but my silence was betrayal: betrayal of Islam, which calls upon Muslims to be courageous and compassionate in the face of injustice; betrayal of America, a nation that relies on its citizens to hold up the bridges of pluralism when others try to destroy them; betrayal of India, a country that has too often seen blood flow in its cities and villages when extremists target minorities and others fail to protect them.

My friend needed more than my silent presence at the lunch table. Pluralism is not a default position, an autopilot mode. Pluralism is an intentional commitment that is imprinted through action. It requires deliberate engagement with difference, outspoken loyalty to others, and proactive protection in the breach. You have to choose to step off the faith line onto the side of pluralism, and then you have to make your voice heard. To follow Robert Frost, it is easy to see the death of pluralism in the fire of a suicide bombing. But the ice of silence will kill it just as well.

This is a story of returning to faith, of finding coherence, of committing to pluralism, and of the influences I owe my life to.
Identity Politics

All creatures come into the world
bringing with them the memory of justice.

J. M. COOTZEE

My first college memory is at the gym. There are three basketball games going on—a black game, an Asian game, and a white game. I am confused, but not about who I am. I know I am white. I have spent years making myself so. That is why I started playing basketball in the first place. It is what the popular white kids at my school did. I figured the physical defect of my brown skin would be overlooked if I perfected a fifteen-foot jump shot. The basketball court, to my eyes, was a big bucket of skin whitener.

I looked at the black and Asian kids. They seemed so comfortable. They shouted at one another up and down the court in a distinct flow, ran pick-and-rolls and give-and-gos in their own unique rhythms. Didn't they want to play on the white court? Hadn't they spent years studying the white game so they could make its moves their own? Isn't that what it means to be colored in America?

The world has never seemed so new to me as it did during those first few months of college. My first lesson was on race. I was stunned
to learn that not everybody wanted to be white. I remember seeing a
Korean girl I had gone to high school with across the hall at the Illini
Union. "Kristen," I called out. But she didn't turn around. "She went
back to her Korean name," a mutual friend, also Korean, later ex-
plained when I told her about the incident. "She won't answer to Kris-
ten anymore."

"What the hell is that about?" I asked.

"It happens to a lot of Koreans when they go to college. They be-
come more involved in their own ethnicity and culture. They hang
out only with other Koreans."

She was using college as a place to de-whiten herself. The more I
looked around, the more I realized that she wasn't the only one. Cafes-
terias were balkanized by race and ethnicity. Unlike in high school,
where the popular (mostly white) kids sat at one table and others
longed for a place there, people wanted to be where they were. In fact,
they were fiercely proud and protective of their own zones.

Every residence hall, in addition to having a general student coun-
cil, had a black student union. I had a class with the president of the
black student union at Allen Hall, where I lived during my freshman
and sophomore years, and was impressed by his intellect and passion.
"Why don't you run for president of Allen Hall Council?" I asked. "I
think you'd be great. I think you'd get elected."

"Fuck Allen Hall Council," he responded. "Everything I do, I do
for black people." The black kid sitting next to him didn't even turn
to face us. He just nodded.

I remember the moment that this made sense to me. During the
first semester of college, I found myself entranced by a beautiful young
woman in my geology class. It goes without saying that she was white;
that was the definition of beauty to me. Class after class, I looked for
my opening, and one day I got close enough to flash a direct smile at
her and approach. She shot me a look of disgust, turned around, and
began walking the other way with a group of equally beautiful, equally
white girls.

I remember thinking, "Well, I shouldn't have tried anyway. Girls
like that don't go for guys like me." And then I stopped in my tracks.
What did I mean by that? Basically this: pretty white girls don't go
for brown guys. My skin color, my ethnic name, the food my mother
cooked meant no access to certain circles. I had learned that rule at a
very young age and lived by it for many years. Violating that invisible
code risked the punishment of ridicule.

For so long, I had simply accepted this as a fact of life. But college
gave me a different framework in which to see race. The problem was
not with my skin; it was with her eyes.

Having swallowed the pill of white supremacy whole during high
school and allowed its poison to spread through my body, I suppose it
should have come as no surprise that I would accept uncritically the
first elixir that presented itself. That elixir was identity politics, and it
was in full swing during my undergraduate years.

The grand idea of identity politics circa 1994, or at least the way
my crew and I understood it, was this: the world, and one's place in it,
was entirely defined by the color of one's skin, the income of one's par-
ents, and the shape of one's genitalia. Middle-class white men had
built a culture, an economy, and a political system designed to main-
tain their own power. First they called it Western civilization, then
they called it America, and now they were calling it globalization.
These people were the oppressors. The rest of us, the oppressed, had
been pawns in their game for far too long. A few heroes over time had
picked up on this, and the bravest among them—Nat Turner, Lucy
Parsons, Stokely Carmichael—had revolted. The rise of identity poli-
tics was the beginning of a new age, a great intellectual liberating
force that allowed us not only to understand the true workings of the
system but also to perceive and return to our own authentic selves.

Our authentic selves were, of course, totally determined by our
ascribed race, class, and gender identities, which shaped everything
from one's politics to one's friendships to one's tastes in food and mu-
sic. To be black was to be liberal, at least; if you knew anything about
your history (which, to us, meant a brush with Marcus Garvey or
Frederick Douglass), you were awakened to your true political nature,
which was to be radical. A black Republican? No such thing. What of Colin Powell and Clarence Thomas? We had two explanations: they had been duped by the white power structure (and therefore weren't really Republicans), or they were willing to sell out their own people for personal profit (and therefore weren't really black).

We spent countless hours discussing nomenclature: black or African American, Hispanic or Latino, Native American or Indigenous Person? We argued to the point of blows over the nature of various oppressions. Were black women more oppressed based on their race or their gender? Who was more marginalized, African Americans, Latinos, or Native Americans? The Asian Americans, feeling a bit left out, invited a radical Asian American speaker to campus who gave a talk called “Where Are the Asian American Malcolm Xs”?

“The personal is political” was our battle cry. Selective individual actions were immediately refracted into large-scale truths. It wasn’t just four white cops who beat Rodney King; it was every white person oppressing every person of color on earth.

In high school history class, America had been presented as the land of opportunity and freedom. I had been told almost nothing about its dark side. But now I couldn’t get enough. I read Howard Zinn’s account of Columbus’s voyage and was sickened that the man we celebrate as “discovering” America made plans to exploit the indigenous people here as soon as he laid eyes on them. I learned that the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution, which led to a massive escalation of the Vietnam War, was probably based on a lie. President Lyndon Johnson had sent waves of poor and minority Americans to destroy a country because of his ego. Power will always oppress people, one of my professors said.

The evidence for that was right in front of me. Champaign-Urbana wasn’t much of a city, but it had many more social problems than Glen Ellyn. All you had to do was open your eyes to see Vietnam vets on the street drinking mouthwash for the alcohol and black kids in the poor part of town going to schools far inferior to the tony University High where the professors sent their children.

I began to see the world through the framework of my radicalizing political consciousness. As I watched drunk white frat boys mock homeless people on Green Street on Friday nights, I saw corporate fat cats eating caviar while poor Americans starved during the Great Depression. When the crowds of Fighting Illini fans streamed by on their way to a basketball game wearing T-shirts and hats displaying the university’s demeaning mascot, Chief Illiniwek, I saw the spirit of Christopher Columbus crushing the natives.

My response was to rage. I remember shouting down my fellow students in sociology classes at the University of Illinois for suggesting that welfare should be reformed so that poor people took more personal responsibility, angrily protesting against conservative speakers who came to campus, calling anybody who applied for a corporate job a sellout. “America is bent on imperialism” was the first thought I had every morning and the last thought I had every night.

I was guided mostly by 1960s-era radical black thought—H. Rap Brown, Huey Newton, early Malcolm X. The key lesson I took from this material was that progress was a myth. It was revolution or nothing. I quoted Malcolm X to the mealy-mouthed liberals who cited the victories of the civil rights movement: “You can’t stick a knife into a man’s back nine inches, pull it out six inches, and call that progress.” I found myself increasingly enamored of the occasional references to the value of violence. “Every time a cop murders somebody in Harlem,” I read in one volume, “we will retaliate by murdering someone in midtown.” “By any means necessary” was Malcolm X’s famous line. It made infinite sense to me. If the American system’s primary tool of engagement was violence, then those of us who sought to change it would have to become fluent in that language.

I found myself pushing the envelope more. I started calling liberals “house niggers” a term I learned from reading Malcolm X, meaning they were too domesticated and comfortable to take the necessary actions to bring down the system. My father, growing increasingly frustrated by my Stridency, told me to stop talking about politics when I visited home. “You’re too bourgeois to see what’s really happening
in this world," I responded. He exploded in anger, saying something about how his "bourgeois" ways were paying my college tuition. I took his anger as evidence that I was on the right path. Every radical had been rejected, even mocked, when he first spoke truth to power. My father's frustration was confirmation that I had gained entry into the tradition of righteous revolutionaries.

I searched for models of people who had tried to block the machinery of American imperialism. One of the campus radicals said to me, "Have you ever heard of Bill Ayers and Bernadine Dohrn? They started an outfit in the 1960s called the Weather Underground that did strategic bombing here in the U.S. You should check them out."

I filed that away in the back of my head. I was sure the reference would come in handy someday.

Gone were my high school dreams of a perfect LSAT score and a prime corporate law job in L.A. I had liberated myself from the capitalist framework that provides comfort for some and poverty for most. I had left the known world and entered the universe of myth.

The one thing that connected me to my past was volunteering. Something about my YMCA experiences and my parents' insistence that service was essential stuck with me. Also, I needed the human connection. My head was swimming with radical theories and my spirit was bursting with anger. The moments I spent trying to concretely improve somebody's life kept me from falling over the edge. Every Sunday morning, I went to a nursing home and played my guitar for the residents. On alternate Monday nights, I helped cook dinner and clean the kitchen at the women's shelter. Thursdays I picked up cakes and cookies from a local bakery and delivered them to the Salvation Army. The leaders of local social service agencies became some of my closest mentors in Champaign.

But my intellectual and activist friends were cool toward such activities. They thought that social services were part of the "system" and that by volunteering I was helping perpetuate the injustices inherent in capitalism. The litmus test they used for any initiative was whether it was "radical," by which they meant, will this activity ultimately destroy the current system? I stopped telling them about the new programs I had started as president of the Allen Hall Volunteer Group because they would inevitably dismiss them with a wave of a clove cigarette and a single line: "That sounds like just another middle-class liberal program."

No doubt there was something superficial about a good deal of the volunteering that took place when I was a student. The other students I worked with at homeless shelters and tutoring programs took their volunteer activities seriously, but when I tried to start discussions on the causes of homelessness or educational inequality, they didn't want to hear it. "Volunteering at the Salvation Army for two hours on Thursday night makes me feel like I am giving back," one of them told me. "Then I don't feel bad when I go out and have fun on Friday night."

"Yeah, but those guys you play cards with on Thursday night are still at the Salvation Army on Friday while you are out partying," I thought. If the primary purpose of volunteering is to help other people, not to assuage our own guilt, shouldn't we spend some time thinking about how to improve the situation of homeless people in a more permanent way?

But I was also aware of a more creative movement bubbling up. It had volunteering at its core, but its broader mission was social change. Organizations such as Teach for America, City Year, and Habitat for Humanity combined the concrete activities of typical volunteer programs with an exciting vision of large-scale transformation. If you volunteered with a Habitat for Humanity project, you weren't just building houses; you were ending poverty housing. If you joined Teach for America, you weren't just helping 30 fourth graders; you were transforming American education. At City Year, you weren't just doing jumping jacks in the park wearing a bright red jacket; you were showing the world that young people were idealistic change makers, not self-absorbed cynics.

Moreover, these organizations took diversity seriously. They realized that service was an ideal place to bring together people from dif-
different racial, ethnic, class, and geographic backgrounds. People built a special relationship with one another when they passed bricks at a Habitat for Humanity site or planned lessons for children at an inner-city school. The common purpose gave them a common bond. Furthermore, because these people came from different backgrounds, they inevitably brought different perspectives to the various challenges that emerged in their service projects. In other words, a diverse team made for better service.

As my angry activist friends bemoaned the lack of participation in our political meetings, I watched thousands of people, from economics majors to English majors, flock to Teach for America, Habitat for Humanity, and City Year. These organizations had managed to create an aura around themselves. They were far larger than the particular programs; they had become ideas in the culture. President Bill Clinton recognized this and created AmeriCorps to build on that energy. The New York Times and other major publications took notice and wrote articles extolling these groups. I realized that Wendy Kopp of Teach for America, Vanessa Kirsch of Public Allies, and Alan Khazei and Michael Brown of City Year were not much older than I was. They had founded their organizations when they were recent college graduates. I had been made to believe that our only heroes were martyrs of the 1960s. I was proud to know that my generation had produced leaders, too.

The dorm I lived in, Allen Hall, was a temple of radical politics and cultural creativity. It was the University of Illinois’s first Living-Learning Community, meaning that academic courses were offered in the dorm itself, with the intention of cultivating a liberal arts college-type intellectual atmosphere. “Freaks and geeks” was what the rest of the campus called it.

One of the first people I met at Allen Hall was a tall, lanky senior named Jeff Finizio. He embodied Allen Hall perfectly. When I came back from class in the afternoon, he was inevitably on the porch, playing Hacksy Sacks and harmonica with the hippie types. He was into things like ethnomusicology and Alan Watts, and had organized theater troupes, writing groups, and political discussion circles in the hall. Jeff had an almost perfect grade point average, but nobody had ever seen him study. The only time I ever saw him in the library, he was listening to Delta blues musicians in the music archive. I once saw him reading a brochure for the Maharishi University in Iowa. When I asked him about it, he told me it was one of the graduate programs he was considering, along with Stanford and the University of Chicago.

I loved Jeff’s offbeat interests, but even more I loved his ability to make things happen. “Why do you spend so much time starting little groups?” I once asked him.

“Because the most important thing you can learn is how to turn an idea into reality,” he responded. I wrote that phrase down in my journal and underlined it three times.

The director of Allen Hall, Howie Schein, was an aging hippie who had received his PhD from Berkeley during its political heyday. Committed to social justice and student empowerment in his own low-key way, Howie attracted the campus’s most politically radical and student-centered faculty to teach courses at Allen. Allen’s section of Introduction to Political Science was famously taught by a Marxist who had played a prominent role in the organization of Vietnam Veterans Against the War. Howie also had music rooms and art studios built in the hall, found funding for students to create political and cultural programs, and started one of the nation’s first guest in residence programs, which brought writers, artists, and political agitators to live in the hall and interact with students for one to two weeks. The purpose, he once told me, was to show students that accounting, law, engineering, and medicine were not the only life paths available.

It was a guest in residence at Allen Hall who nudged me toward my second serious relationship. Emily Shihadeh, a Palestinian American playwright, performed her one-woman play about growing up in Ramallah and inventing her own destiny in San Francisco to a rapt audience at Allen Hall. I loved her. She had my mother’s strength of will and my father’s sense of humor. She wanted to see Champaign, so
I took her to all the places I volunteered: the nursing home where I played music, the homeless shelter where I served dinner, the elementary school where I taught peace games to children. Driving back to Allen Hall after one of these excursions, she turned to me and said, "I can see what you are doing. You are trying to give all of your love away through these different service activities. It is good you are helping people, but you will never get full from it. This kind of love you have has to be given to one person, a special person."

I told her about Sarah. We had met at a student leadership conference and been friends ever since. The activist circle at Illinois was small, so we ran into each other a lot. Earlier that year, we had founded a program that took residents of one of the homeless shelters for social outings once a week. We were often the only two students who showed up, and after we took the residents back to the shelter, we would go to Zorbas for a sandwich and some late-night blues. One night, after we dropped the guys off, Sarah looked up at the sky and said, "Tonight is a perfect night for star spinning."

"What's that?" I asked.

"You've never been star spinning?" she asked in mock surprise. And so we drove to a field a few miles from campus, crossed our wrists, grabbed each other's hands, and spun around looking skyward. We fell down, arms sprawled out, laughing hysterically.

If I hadn't felt so dizzy, I might have reached for her, I told Emily. "Oh, habibi," she said to me, using an Arabic term of affection. "You go to this beautiful girl before she concludes you are too stupid and looks for someone else."

Being Jewish was central to Sarah's identity. She had been raised in Jewish youth programs; had twice been on the March of the Living, where young Jews visit the sites of concentration camps in Europe; and had served on the international board of B'nai B'rith's youth organization. When we met, she was studying Hebrew in preparation for a semester in Israel.

Whereas Lisa's religiosity was based on notions of truth, Sarah's was based on commitment to peoplehood and social justice. She did not strictly keep Shabbat, the Jewish day of rest, but she lit candles every Friday evening in honor of its arrival. "My great-grandmother lit candles, my grandmother lit candles, my mother lights candles, so I will light candles," she explained to me. Her parents had escaped Romania's brutal dictator Ceausescu in the early 1970s and moved to Israel. They had left Israel for the United States, then returned when war broke out in 1973. Sarah would joke, "Most people leave countries when wars happen. My parents moved back." But I understood the seriousness behind what she was saying. Her people had been willing to fight for Jewishness, and Sarah felt it was her honor and responsibility to be a part of the tradition and community that others had fought and died for.

Sarah spoke often about tikkun olam and tzedakah, the Hebrew terms for repairing the world and doing charity. These were the most important principles of Judaism to her, and in her eyes they commanded Jews to help all humanity, especially those who are suffering. I remember going with Sarah to Foellinger Auditorium at the University of Illinois to hear a Holocaust survivor speak about his experiences. Sarah wept throughout the talk. She had visited the concentration camp this man had been in. When the speech was done, Sarah asked the first question: "I have been involved in Holocaust education since I was twelve. I lived by the motto 'Never again.' But it is happening again, now, before our eyes, in Bosnia. What will make it stop?"

A hush fell over the audience. The man onstage mumbled something weak, congratulating Sarah for caring. The Q and A continued, but Sarah's question hung in the room for the remainder of the event. She and I left. I was quieter than usual. "What's wrong?" she asked.

"Nothing really," I told her. "It's just that the only other person I've heard talk about what's happening in Bosnia is my dad. He's so angry that it's Muslims being massacred there. He's convinced that if it was Christians or Jews, the rest of the world would try to stop it."
"I just think it’s horrible, all those people being killed," Sarah said. "I didn’t even know they were Muslims. But whoever they are, the world should come to their aid."

Something occurred to me. In all the sociology courses on identity I had taken, in all the late-night conversations we had at Allen Hall on the subject, the issue of religion rarely came up. We were always talking about freedom for women or Latinos or lesbians. Identity was always defined as race, class, gender, or, occasionally, sexual orientation. When I became a resident adviser, half of my training focused on dealing with issues around those particular identities. The service learning movement took diversity seriously, but it was always about blacks and whites, poor folks and rich folks, urbanites and suburbanites; never about Muslims, Christians, Jews. I had been to many programs at the Office of Minority Student Affairs, and they also had always focused on the same things. We talked about the limited roles for black actors, the discrimination that kept gay politicians in the closet, the burden of the second shift for women, the cultural capital that accrued to middle-class kids because of the circumstances of their birth. We extolled bell hooks and Gloria Anzaldua for their ability to write about these various identities in an integrated way, and filled hours debating whether the oppressions associated with each identity added together or multiplied together. But right now, as we griped about Denzel Washington getting passed over for the Oscar for Malcolm X, a religious war was raging in the Balkans, tens of thousands of people were dying, and faith was nowhere to be found in the diversity discussion.

What I didn’t tell Sarah at that time, what I had told few people actually because I didn’t know how to make sense of it myself, was that I had recently discovered religion.

I had come across a copy of Robert Coles’s The Call of Service and was drawn to one of the people he wrote about: Dorothy Day. He spoke of her with absolute awe, as if she was a force of nature. In her thirties, during the Great Depression, Day had started something called the Catholic Worker movement, which combined radical politics, direct service, and community living. For nearly half a century, Day had given up her own middle-class privilege to live with those who went without in what was called a Catholic Worker House of Hospitality. The original House of Hospitality was on the Lower East Side of New York City, but it inspired more than a hundred others across the nation.

Like everything else that seemed good, I was convinced that the Catholic Worker movement had faded away in the 1960s.

“Oh, no,” somebody told me when I made an offhand reference to the Catholic Worker and bemoaned its disappearance. “There are still many, many Catholic Worker houses left. In fact, there is one here in Champaign.”

“What’s it like?” I asked, shocked.

“Part shelter for poor folks, part anarchist movement for Catholic radicals, part community for anyone who enters. Really, it’s about a whole new way of living. You’ve got to go there to know.”

From the moment I entered St. Jude’s, it was clear to me that this was different from any other place I’d been. I couldn’t figure out whether it was a shelter or a home. There was nobody doing intake. There was no executive director’s office. White, black, and brown kids played together in the living room. I smelled food and heard English and Spanish voices coming from the kitchen. The first thing somebody said to me was, “Are you staying for dinner?”

“Yes,” I said.

The salad and stew were simple and filling, and the conversation came easy. After dinner, I asked someone, “Who are the staff here? And who are the residents?”

“That’s not the best way to think about this place,” the person told me. “We’re a community. The question we ask is, ‘What’s your story?’ There is a family here who emigrated from a small village in Mexico. The father found out about this place from his Catholic parish. They’ve been here for four months, enough time for the father to find a job and scrape together the security deposit on an apartment. There
are others here with graduate degrees who believe that sharing their lives with the needy is their Christian calling. If you want to know the philosophy behind all of this, read Dorothy Day."

I found some of Day's old essays and a copy of her autobiography. In those writings, I found an articulation of what it meant to be human, to be radical, and to be useful. Recalling the thoughts of her college days, Day wrote, "I did not see anyone taking off his coat and giving it to the poor. I didn't see anyone having a banquet and calling in the lame, the halt and the blind. And those who were doing it, like the Salvation Army, did not appeal to me. I wanted life and I wanted the abundant life. I wanted it for others too."

Elsewhere in her autobiography, she wrote: "Why was so much done in remedying social evils instead of avoiding them in the first place? ... Where were the saints to try to change the social order, not just to minister to the slaves but to do away with slavery?"

Here was what I had been seeking for so long: a vision of radical equality—all human beings living the abundant life—that could be achieved through both a direct service approach and a change-the-system politics. For so long, those two things had existed in separate rooms in my life—a different group of friends, a different way of talking for each. Here was a movement that combined them. Finally, the two sides of myself could be in the same room.

The most radical part about Dorothy Day and the Catholic Worker movement was the insistence that everything the movement did was guided by a single force: love. "We have all known the long loneliness and we have learned that the only solution is love and that love comes with community," Day wrote at the end of her autobiography. I felt as if she was talking to me one-on-one. I was tired of raging. It left me feeling empty, and what did it achieve anyway? I wanted to improve people's lives because I loved humanity, not because I hated the system. Sometimes, I thought, my activist friends hated the system more than they loved humanity.

The Catholic Worker became my community. I started making weekly visits to St. Jude House while I was in Champaign. And the summer after my sophomore year, Jeff Pizzino and I did a seven-week road trip through Catholic Worker houses ranging from the Northeast to the Deep South. I cut up carrots for the soup kitchen at St. Joseph's House in New York City; demonstrated at the Pentagon with Catholic Workers in Washington, D.C.; heard the inspiring story of a Vietnam veteran in Atlanta who had climbed back from addiction and mental illness and was now helping others do the same.

More than anything, I marveled at the spirit with which Catholic Workers carried out their tasks. The only word to describe it is grace. I was accustomed to seeing the staff at social service agencies get frustrated, even angry, with the people they were working with (whom they referred to, strangely, as "clients"). I never saw that at a Catholic Worker house. The Houses of Hospitality were, by and large, cultures of kindness. And unlike most of the other demonstrations I went to, which were dominated by anger and self-righteousness, speakers at Catholic Worker demonstrations spoke even their most radical statements with an air of humility and love. When I demonstrated at the Pentagon with a group of Catholic Workers, they didn't shout about how evil soldiers were; they sang hymns and said they would pray for the military brass walking in. Even when Dorothy Day referred to America as a "filthy, rotten system," she somehow managed to do it in a way that called for hopeful, loving change, not anger and rage.

I was intoxicated by Day's vision and felt deep admiration for the Catholic Workers I met. I found myself asking constantly, "What is the source of the love you so often speak of?" Their answer came in one three-letter word that I had rarely heard during my time in college: God.

In The Call of Service, Robert Coles described a conversation between one of his Harvard undergraduates and Day in the late 1970s. The young man, a science major, told Day, "You've done so much already for these people."

"The Lord has done it all; we try to be adequate instruments of His," she answered.

"Well, it's been you folks who have done all this," the young man
insisted, pointing to the soup kitchen in which Day and other Catholic Workers were busily preparing a meal, skeptical of calling in a supernatural power for what seemed clearly to be a human action.

Day was gentle but equally insistent that God was the source of her work. "Oh, when we pray, we are told—we are given answers to our questions. They [the answers] come to us, and then we know He has sent us the thoughts, the ideas. They all don't just belong to us. He lives in our thoughts, the Lord does."

According to Day, all we humans can do is be grateful for the opportunity to hear God's call and ask for the strength to answer it. For Day, that answer came in the form of prayer and work, which to her amounted to much the same thing:

I may be old and near the end, but in my mind, I'm the same old Dorothy trying to show the good Lord that I'm working for Him to the best of my ability. I pray that God will give me a chance to pray to Him the way I like to pray to Him. If I pray by making soup and serving soup, I feel I'm praying by doing. When I'm in bed, and the doctor has told me firmly to stay there for a few days, I don't feel I've earned my right to pray for myself and others, to pray for these poor folks who come here for a square meal.

My college years were about entering alien territory intrepidly. What was a suburban, middle-class, Indian kid doing in Marxist circles and homeless shelters? I wore the unexpectedness of it all like a badge of honor. Sometimes I wondered whether shock value was more important to me than social justice.

The Catholic Workers were the least likely circle for a kid like me. They were more radical than the Marxist intellectuals I knew, more gentle than the social service types I volunteered with, more intelligent than the professors who taught my classes, and more effective than the activists I protested with. And yet I felt so at ease with them. Reading Dorothy Day, I realized why: they knew that God had created humanity with the hope that we would achieve the Kingdom on earth. Their purpose for doing this work was in their bones and emerged with every breath. Once one realizes that, what can one do but obey with joy? As William James wrote in The Varieties of Religious Experience, "[Faith is] the belief that there is an unseen order, and that our supreme good lies in harmoniously adjusting ourselves thereto."

One of my discomforts with radical politics was that it deified the individual. The underlying belief of all the radicals I knew was that our reasons, our methods, our ability to help others all came from our own minds. We were so smart and smug. I even felt a peculiar similarity with the Jeopardy battles my friends and I had had in high school, except the game with my radical friends was who could most elegantly apply Fanon to current events. Day's view that God is the source of love, equality, and connection—and that He requires His ultimate creation, humanity, to achieve the same on earth—made sense to me in a deep place, perhaps the same place I was trying to fill in high school by fasting.

When Catholic Workers asked about my religion, I told them that I didn't really have one. They were happy for me to participate in their prayer life anyway, and they made it clear that I should do whatever felt comfortable to me and no more. I found the singing and praying and moments of silence deeply inspiring. I bowed my head and followed along as best I could. But I always found myself standing at a slight angle to the core symbols of the Christian faith—the Cross, the blood, the Resurrection—and I never felt any desire to convert. Nobody in the Catholic Worker movement ever suggested that I do so.

They saved me just the same. I realized this years later, when I met Bill Ayers. I was working in Chicago and interested in new models of youth development. Several people suggested I go see Bill, a Distinguished Professor of Education at the University of Illinois at Chicago and a key figure in both local school reform and the small schools movement. "Where have I heard that name before?" I thought, and
suddenly I made the connection to the Weather Underground, the radical sixties group that had planted bombs in federal buildings as a strategy for bringing down the system.

Bill had recently published his memoir, *Fugitive Days*. The similarities between our stories was scary. We were both middle-class kids from Glen Ellyn who had discovered the dark side of America in college and responded with rage. We both had contempt for liberals and romanticized the violent rebellions of John Brown and Che Guevara. We were both familiar with the Jeffersonian line that the people should rebel during every era. We both fancied ourselves in the vanguard.

Sitting at the kitchen table one night in 1968, talking about the death machine that was the U.S. government, a new guy in Bill’s circle, Terry Robbins, had suggested that things had gone too far and it was time to bomb the pigs into the Stone Age. At first Bill and his friends resisted. That’s crazy, they said. “There’s got to be a place in this revolution for a man of principled violence,” Terry responded. Bill found the image intoxicating, and he spent the ensuing years doing violent battle with cops, learning to build bombs, and calling for all “mother country radicals” to bring the war home with acts of violence on American soil. He lost several friends and a decade of his life in the process.

What if I had been at that kitchen table that night? What if a Terry Robbins figure had crossed my path, showed me his sketchbook full of bomb designs, encouraged me to study the *Blaster’s Handbook*? At nineteen, I was already convinced that America understood only violence. I was just this side of believing that it was my responsibility to inflict it. I only needed a nudge.

My father couldn’t make it all the way through *Fugitive Days*. “It reminds me too much of you,” he said. “It scares the shit out of me, what you could have become.”

It had been chance—grace—that I had sat at the Catholic Worker table and it had been Dorothy Day’s book that had fallen into my hands.

On our summer road trip, Sarah and I visited Emily Shihadeh in San Francisco. She received us warmly, with big hugs, and after spending a few minutes with Sarah, she declared that taking her advice and making my move was the smartest thing I had ever done. Then came the platefuls of hummus, falafel, and pita. “I love Middle Eastern food,” Sarah said.

“This is Arab food, Palestinian food,” Emily responded, growing suddenly cool. “The Israelis occupy our land, but they cannot take our culture.”

Sarah understood that comment in context, as illustrative of the sentiment of the people who had lost something, in some cases everything, when Israel had triumphed. She did not grow defensive or angry. Instead, she resolved to explore the Palestinian side of the matter during her semester in Israel.

I visited her in Israel, at Hebrew University on Mount Scopus, where a few years later a close friend of hers was in the cafeteria during a suicide bombing. We floated in the Dead Sea, wandered through Jerusalem’s markets (where Sarah bought a plaque for my parents with *IN THE NAME OF GOD written in Arabic on it*), ate hot bagels with savory za’atar (an aromatic spice mixture), went to the Wailing Wall and the Dome of the Rock, visited the Way of the Cross. In Haifa, we walked through the gardens of the Baha’i Temple and listened to an earnest young man in pleated khaki pants tell us about the need for unity.

Sarah delved into the Palestinian situation and into Jewish history in Israel. She was heartbroken by both. I knew little about either. Sarah took me on a tour of the Arab neighborhoods in East Jerusalem. The tour guide was a friend of hers, a young American Jew who had moved to Israel, what Jews call “making aliya.” He and the Arab kids who gathered spoke in both Hebrew and Arabic, talking about life in Arab villages, the simple pleasures of backgammon games and Arabic coffee on Sunday afternoons, the frustration of waiting for hours at Israeli checkpoints on their way to visit family in the West Bank. Sarah
put her hands over her face when she heard this. "I hate that their lives are like this," she told me later.

Our tour guide at Yad Vashem, the Israeli Holocaust memorial, was another American who had made aliya. He came across as a smooth intellectual, mentioning his two PhDs in passing. After he had caught us in the web of his seductive intellect, he carefully injected his right-wing poison. He told stories of the destruction of Kristallnacht, the livelihoods lost, the intimidation of children and women in Jewish neighborhoods, the fear of men that it would only get worse. He ended the story in a flat voice, saying that the world had done nothing then, and why should Jews expect the world to pay attention to their suffering now? He walked us through the various halls of Yad Vashem, telling more stories of suffering, bringing half the group to tears, and continuing to press his particular politics. "Oslo," he said, and shook his head in disgust. "Haven't we Jews heard this before? Land for peace. It didn't work when Neville Chamberlain, that spineless wimp, tried it sixty years ago. Look what it led to then. Who can believe it will lead to something different now?"

I knew little about international peacemaking and nothing about the Oslo Accords, signed by Israel and the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) in September 1993, but I could tell a spoiler when I saw one. Sarah was as furious with him as I was. "There are so many people who are trying to create a just situation here, and people like him are working to defeat us every day," she told me on the way out.

Jewish identity issues had always played a large role in Sarah's life, and they became paramount in Israel. "The most important thing to people here is that you marry another Jew," she told me. "The intermarriage rate between Jews and non-Jews is so high now that some Jewish leaders are saying that the Jews are killing Judaism ourselves. They would rather a Jew eat a bacon double cheeseburger than marry outside the faith." In her own gentle way, Sarah was telling me that she was struggling with our relationship. She felt as if she had an obligation to her tradition, her people. I was too daft to catch her drift.

We went to a Shabbat dinner in Jerusalem with a group of young American and Israeli Jews. The conversation shifted back and forth between graduate school plans and social justice issues. These were the things that college students and recent graduates talked about all the time. I felt completely at home. I wound up in a conversation with a young Jewish woman in a long skirt. It looked like a religious outfit. I asked her about it, and she explained to me that she was an Orthodox Jew and followed a tradition called shomer negiah. In her community, unmarried men and women could not date, could not touch, could not be in the same room together unsupervised. "I will marry a Jew," she told me with total certainty, "and I will do it according to the dictates of my tradition."

She motioned toward Sarah and said, "The girl you came with, she is your girlfriend? She is a Jew?"

"Yes," I said.

"And you, what are you?"

"Nothing really, I guess. I'm exploring different spiritualities right now," I told her.

"Will you and Sarah marry?" she asked.

"Um, we don't really talk about that right now," I said. "I mean, we're together. That feels like a lot for where we are at in our lives."

"Oh," she said, looking at me with some suspicion. I realized that she was younger than both Sarah and me, but she did not consider marriage too much of a responsibility for her. It would be an honor and a duty for her to be married; it would be carrying out the will of her community and continuing with the practices of her tradition.

"And if you get married, what will your wedding be like? Whose tradition will it follow?"

I shrugged. It wasn't something I had thought about. It didn't seem important.

Sarah had been listening to our conversation, and I could feel her getting increasingly uncomfortable. At the mention of our wedding, she got up abruptly, disrupting the conversation she was in, and said to me, "I want to go." I could tell she was mad, but I had no idea why. I got our coats, hailed a taxi, and waited for her to lay into me.
"Do you have any idea what you were doing tonight?" she said. "That girl you were talking to is a devout Orthodox Jew. She lives by rules that were handed down by God. She is part of a tradition that is thousands of years old. Every question she asked you was a ridiculing of me. There was an invisible conversation that you were totally oblivious to, whose main theme was that Sarah is a bad Jew because she is dating a goy. The only reason she kept on asking you questions was to get more details on how wayward I am."

I wanted to say, "Screw her. Why does she get to tell you what to do?" And then I realized something: Sarah wanted that. She had come to Israel to connect with her community, her tradition. What is a community but a group of people who have some claim over you, and what is a tradition but a set of stories and principles and rules handed down over hundreds or thousands of years that each new generation has to wrestle with?

I started sobbing. The cabdriver must have thought we were crazy. Sarah, warm and sweet, moved over to me and put her hand on my back. I had totally lost it by this point, weeping uncontrollably, as if a loved one had died.

"What is it, my love?" Sarah asked.

I finally pulled myself together. "It's just that you feel like you have something to live up to, this Judaism thing. You have these principles you talk about, and this community that watches out for you, and even when it feels suffocating, at least you know they care for you. I have none of that. I just have some things that I'm interested in and a bunch of groups I come in and out of. But I could leave them at any time, and they wouldn't know I was gone."

It was a harsh truth I was telling. For all my talk of identity politics, I had yet to develop much of an identity.

4
Real World Activism

We may either smother the divine
fire of youth or we may feed it.
JANE ADDAMS

Brother Wayne Tesdale had two great hopes for me: that I would start an interfaith youth movement and that I would take mushrooms with him. He got one.

I met Brother Wayne in the spring of 1997. In addition to being a Catholic monk, Brother Wayne had a PhD in philosophy and had spent years at an ashram in India, where he took vows in a Hindu monastic tradition. He was also on the board of the Council for a Parliament of the World's Religions, an international interfaith organization based in Chicago.

Brother Wayne fascinated me. He had a head of gray hair but the spirit of an idealistic teenager, easily thrilled and totally devoid of cynicism. He seemed a cross between Don Quixote, Zorba the Greek, Saint Francis of Assisi, and the mad scientist from the Back to the Future movies. "Come see me in Hyde Park," he said when we met. I jumped at the chance.

He lived in a small apartment in the Catholic Theological Union
complex. Books on Christian theology, pictures of Hindu deities, and CDs of Indian classical music were strewn everywhere. Brother Wayne cleared a small place near the window and announced that it was time to meditate. A ticking clock bothered him. I heard him get up to put it away. When we were done meditating, I saw him retrieve it from the freezer.

"Time for a walk," he said. We pulled on our sweaters and headed south down Cornell Avenue. We passed a dog. Brother Wayne bent down and rubbed the dog's head. The dog wagged its tail and barked. "That is a very spiritual dog," Brother Wayne told me as we ambled on. "I know most of the dogs in this neighborhood," he added.

We continued our walk until we came to a man wearing a heavy winter coat and carrying a black garbage bag with aluminum cans. "Hey, Wayne," he said. "Ralph, it's so nice to see you," Brother Wayne replied. They caught up. Brother Wayne took out his wallet and handed Ralph a twenty. "Ralph is a very spiritual man," he said. "I know most of the homeless people in this neighborhood."

We entered a café, ordered, and sat down. A man from outside saw Brother Wayne, waved frantically, and bounded in. "I've told you before," scolded the girl at the counter, "no public restroom."

He looked at Brother Wayne. Brother Wayne nodded. "Coffee," the man said triumphantly. "Large," he said with glee. The man sat down at our table. The girl brought the coffee. Brother Wayne handed over $2. The man launched into a screeching rant about how Mayor Richard Daley was putting poison in the water supply. Brother Wayne listened. "Now, Harold, perhaps you should——" Harold cut him off and started in on the Clinton administration.

I grabbed a newspaper from the next table. Brother Wayne listened some more. We finished our coffee. Brother Wayne and Harold hugged. I offered a polite, somewhat standoffish hand. Harold pumped it. Brother Wayne and I headed back to his apartment. "Harold has a spiritual side, but sometimes it's hard to see," Brother Wayne explained. I half expected him to add that he knew most of the raving lunatics in the neighborhood.

Somehow, in between these various encounters, I got the story of why Brother Wayne was interested in me. He was convinced that we were experiencing the interspiritual moment in human history; a time when the great religions of the world would come together to affirm their common values. He wanted more action from the interfaith movement, particularly around environmental issues and freeing Tibet. But after more than a decade of involvement with interfaith organizations, Brother Wayne had lost hope that the existing leaders of the interfaith movement would take bold steps. "They are all very spiritual people," he explained to me, "but they are afraid of exercising their prophetic voice." So he had set out to find new blood.

Then he turned to me and said with utter seriousness, "I think you can play a leadership role in the global interfaith youth movement. I can tell you are a very spiritual person."

"Sure," I told him. Who can say no to that?

I had been in Chicago for about six months. I had spent the summer after graduating from college traveling around the United States with Sarah. We drove from New York City across to Seattle, down to San Francisco, and then back to Chicago, hiking in national parks, hanging out in the bohemian areas of cities, and volunteering at Catholic Worker houses along the way. Unlike my friends, who despite their radical politics had all locked up jobs before graduating or been accepted to graduate school, I came back to Chicago in mid-August 1996 with a firm commitment to do something good but no concrete plans. I discovered the St. Francis Catholic Worker House on the North Side of the city. All the rooms were taken, but I was welcome to the couch in the front area. Be warned, Ruthie told me, the cats have a proprietary interest in it; the window is drafty; and Jimmy, one of the residents, gets phone calls from his imaginary friends in the middle of the night and argues loudly with them until dawn. It sounded like home to me. I moved in and started looking for a job.

I found exactly what I was looking for: a teaching position at an alternative education program for urban minority high school drop-
outs on the near northwest side of Chicago. A friend of mine who knew a departing teacher at the school told me they were hiring. I showed up on graduation day, stayed through the ceremony, and sat in a chair outside the school director's office until she returned. She looked at my résumé, noticed that I had no teaching experience, and pointed out that, at twenty, I would be younger than many of my students. "I will do everything in my power to be an effective teacher here," I told her. Only one teacher was staying at the school. The school director was desperate, and I guess I was convincing enough to take a chance on.

The school was a program of the Association House of Chicago, a large social service agency inspired by Jane Addams's Hull House. We were located on North Avenue in between Damen and Western, right on the border between the two gang nations that define growing up in Chicago for too many urban teenagers. The neighborhood, Wicker Park, was fast gentrifying. Streetlights, coffee shops, and vegetarian restaurants were moving in, and working-class people of color were heading west in search of affordable rents.

Called El Cuarto Año, or "the fourth year," the school was expected to take high school dropouts who read at a fifth-grade level and prepare them to pass the general equivalency diploma, or GED, exam within six months. That would have been an impossible task if our students had an ideal support system. Most didn't. Many of our male students were involved in gangs, and some had already done stints in the juvenile detention facility. Most of our female students had at least one baby. The vast majority were poor, many were in the process of being uprooted by Wicker Park's gentrification, and none of them had had good experiences in school. Safety, baby-sitting, basic nutrition, and self-confidence were all issues that had to be addressed along with education.

I was absolutely confident. Had I not read radical education theory? Did I not have deep insights into urban poverty and youth development based on my advanced sociology classes? Was I not the founder of several tutoring programs for elementary school children in my college town? I barely paid attention to any of the discussion in the faculty meetings. I planned to run my classroom my way. When the students started complaining that other teachers were boring and ineffective compared to me, my colleagues would be prepared for me to show them how to be a real ghetto teacher. I figured it would happen by October.

As part of its retention strategy, El Cuarto Año required each student to identify a support person—a parent, an older sibling, a romantic partner. In the meetings I held with prospective students and their support people prior to the beginning of the school year, I spent a good chunk of time explaining that I understood why they had been unsuccessful in school. I emphasized that the system had been designed to fail them. I cited Jonathan Kozol and William Ryan on the chronic underfunding of urban schools due to unfair tax policy. I talked about bell hooks's theory that the legacy of racism and the odor of colonialism deeply impact the attitude of students of color toward school, which they associate with white supremacy. I assured them that I would be taking a Freirean approach to teaching, using the knowledge base that my students brought into the classroom. And just to put their minds at ease, I confirmed that Ebonics was not only allowed but encouraged in my classroom.

After hearing my lecture, one parent asked, "You're going to teach my daughter how to read, right?"

I realized that I had skipped that part. In fact, I had hardly thought about it at all. My liberal arts education had provided me with ways to understand what was wrong with the world but few skills to help put it right. My own arrogance had prevented me from seeking effective practical methods of helping urban minority high school dropouts get an education. In a week, I would face a classroom full of challenging students, and I had no idea how to reach them. My confidence quickly gave way to fear.

I became a teacher the hard way: by designing ineffective lesson plans, having my students sneer when I taught them, and working until midnight to adjust the next day's plan so that I didn't make the
same mistakes as I had the day before. I learned how important it is to start class on time, to demand that all assignments be completed in neat penmanship, and to assign books that both challenged and appealed to my students.

Sometimes I took a break during my midnight lesson-planning sessions and imagined one of my college professors teaching my class. I couldn't help but laugh at the vision of some of the nation's leading experts on minority education and urban sociology faced with teaching the students about whom they theorized. Nearly every course I took in college had begun with the professor saying that his or her main goal was to make us "critical thinkers." I brought that same view to my classroom and spent a lot of time explaining structural racism and the legacy of colonialism.

But my students at El Cuarto Año were experts on inequality. They didn't need to hear from me that the hand they got dealt was unfair. What they needed was somebody who could teach them basic, useful skills: algebra, reading comprehension, essay composition. Then they would have what my suburban education gave me: the tools to make up my own mind about the world around me. I began wishing that my professors had spent a little more time lecturing on how to constructively engage the world as it is and a little less time teaching me how to criticize it.

More than anything else, I was amazed by how extensively gang violence pervaded my students' lives. Some of them couldn't ride the bus or train to school for fear of encountering rival gang members. Others wouldn't come to school for days at a time because of a gang obligation. "I had an operation," they would say when they showed up a week later. That was code for being called on by a gang leader to join an organized battle with another gang, sometimes across the street, sometimes across the city.

I remember tutoring Jose after school one day and noticing a perfectly round hole in his jeans. "What's that?" I asked.

"That's where I got shot, dog," he said, pride filling his voice. "It was a battle at Leavitt and LeMoyne, when the Kings used to own that corner." He showed me the pitchfork he had tattooed on his arm, the sign of the Latin Kings.

"I don't get it," I told him. "Are you telling me the same guy who is sitting here reading poetry by William Blake stands on street corners with a gun because of that little sign?"

"You think the school I went to had teachers that stayed after for tutoring sessions? Man, the teachers at that school didn't even show up half the time. We'd have some stupid sub up there in the front of the room yelling at us to do a worksheet, samedamn worksheet yesterday's sub gave us to do. Since I was six years old, everybody around me be asking 'What gang you ride? What gang you ride?' Nobody asked, 'What poetry you read? What level of math you at.' One day, you decide you might as well ride something, or else you nobody to no one. So you choose one. Then you hated by half and loved by half. But at least you somebody.'"

In early November, I left the St. Francis Catholic Worker House. I had a constant cold as a result of the drafty window, a bunch of scratches on my arm from the cat, and continual sleep deprivation thanks to Jimmy's late-night conversations with his imaginary friends, which had gotten louder and louder as Jimmy had gotten deader and deader. I had met another recent college graduate through activist circles in Chicago, and the two of us found an apartment together.

I was making progress as a teacher. School no longer felt like a battle. My students' reading and writing skills were improving dramatically. Many did earn their GEDs, several continued their education at local community colleges, and a couple even went directly on to DePaul University. But it was a lonely existence. I felt as if I was bursting with stories from school and had nobody to tell them to. My $12,000 salary prevented me from being a regular part of the dinner-and-a-show social scene that some of my friends with higher-paying jobs were in. What I really missed was a community, a setup where sharing a story or asking a question was just a walk down the hall away.

On New Year's Day 1997, I resolved to address the problem di-
rectly. I suggested to my roommate that we host a potluck for our generation of activists in Chicago—teachers, social workers, environmentalists, community organizers, whatever. Six people showed up on the first Tuesday in February. I cooked masala potatoes, the only dish I knew how to make (a fact that is, sadly, still true). We talked about typical activist stuff—the gentrification happening in the city, the centrist mode of the Democratic Party—but mostly we exchanged stories and had laughs. We had all gone through the experience of taking a set of ideals we had gathered as undergraduates and trying to apply them in this postcollege life.

"When are we going to do this again?" asked my friend Jeff from Allen Hall, who was working as a community organizer in a Latino neighborhood of Chicago.

"Next week," I offered.

And so it became a ritual. Every Tuesday I would wake up excited, get home early, cook my potatoes, and wait for my activist friends to start showing up around 7:00 p.m. The numbers grew, from the original six, to their immediate circle of friends, to those people's circles, and on and on. People on the South Side of Chicago heard about the Tuesday night potlucks and started coming up to the North Side for the vegetarian food and conversation. People had friends at universities in the Midwest, at Michigan and Illinois and Wisconsin, and they dropped by during their spring breaks. By the time the weather got warm, we were spilling out into the front yard. At one point, there must have been eighty people there. They brought poems to share, instruments to play, and news from activists organizing students and workers in out-of-the-way places.

While washing dishes around ten one night, I overheard a conversation behind me. "I live for Tuesday nights," one person said.

"Me, too," another said. "This is the only place where I feel people get what I'm about. I wish we could have this energy on a 24/7 basis."

"You mean live together?" a third asked. "This ain't the sixties, man. That doesn't happen anymore."

I turned around. "Sure it does. Ever heard of the Catholic Worker movement? Their whole thing is based on the idea of people with social justice values living together in community and serving others."

Our conversation was beginning to attract attention. A couple of people who had graduated from the University of Wisconsin piped in. "It happens in Madison, too. There's a whole system of cooperatives up there where students and local activists live together, buy food in bulk, share chores, and generally energize each other to do good in the world." The idea started taking shape.

We decided to ask a senior Chicago activist, Kathy Kelly, founder of an organization called Voices in the Wilderness that opposed sanctions and war on Iraq, to come by the following week and give us some advice on making this idea a reality. Kathy was overjoyed to hear a group of young activists in Chicago talk about forming a social justice community. She told us about a Catholic parish in the Uptown neighborhood with an almost empty convent. Most of the nuns had left, and the priest was considering renting it. We better hurry, Kathy warned us; other people were interested in the building as well.

About six of us were committed to the idea of forming a community. We started meeting every Sunday night to figure out the shape of the project. We put together a mission statement, decided that community decisions would be made by consensus, and crafted a process for admitting new members.

"I love this," Linda said during one meeting. "We each bring something important and unique to this discussion. Mark and Allie have the experience of living in co-ops in Madison. Eboo and Jeff know about the Catholic Worker movement. It reminds me of my favorite childhood story, about a guy who comes into a starving village with a large pot and a big stone and tells the villagers that he is going to cook them stone soup. He puts water and the stone in a pot, and when it starts boiling, he tastes it and says, 'It's almost ready, but it needs some carrots.' One of the villagers says that he has some carrots, and he runs and gets those. The guy cuts them up, puts them in the pot, and then tastes it again and says, 'Almost ready. It just needs some cel-
People were quiet for a moment. The story had struck a profound chord. "I think that's exactly what we're about," Jeff said. "Creating a space that brings out the various talents of a diverse community, and then collecting those talents so that they form something even better that can feed all of us."

"I think we just got our name—Stone Soup," John said.

A small group of us went to meet with Father Lambert from Our Lady of Lourdes Parish. We described the mission of Stone Soup and told him that each of us was actively helping others through our professional work. What we were about resonated with him, but he preferred to rent his convent to a religious group. "Are any of you Catholic?" he asked.

Nobody raised a hand.

"Anybody Christian?"

A couple of people said they had been raised Christian.

"Anybody religious?"

Nobody.

He paused for a long time. "Well, your mission certainly has a spiritual core. I am going to get scrutinized for this move by the archdiocese, but I think I'm willing to give it a try."

Seven of us moved into the Stone Soup Cooperative on Ashland in the Uptown neighborhood of Chicago in September 1997. Our membership grew to fifteen that first year. Our Tuesday night potlucks regularly drew fifty-plus people, including some of the most cutting-edge young activists and artists in the city. We were covered by the Chicago Tribune, Chicago Public Radio, and the Chicago Reader (the city's alternative weekly, which referred to Stone Soup as a community "that smelled strongly of lentils"). Stone Soup started playing a role in neighborhood affairs, especially in doing our best to keep Uptown economically and ethnically diverse. A small group of forward-thinking people started pooling their money, and when, unexpectedly, a large house down the street went on the market, they had several thousand dollars toward a down payment on a site that would become Stone Soup II, the Leland House.

Somebody once asked me for a metaphor to describe Stone Soup, and I said it was the love child of Walt Whitman and Ani DiFranco. It was the most creative group of people I have ever been around, the most fun I have ever had. But there was a part of me that it did not fill. At Stone Soup, we rejoiced in creating ourselves anew every day. The lightness of that was not so much unbearable as unsatisfying. Occasionally, I would think about Sarah in Israel, and I wondered what it might be like to feel the weight of history. I loved my work as a teacher, and I loved the people I was living with, but however I combined community, justice, and creativity, it did not add up to identity.

And that was one of the key reasons I was attracted to Brother Wayne. He might have had his head in the clouds, but he had a very clear sense of his role in the cosmos.

My friend Kevin and I started tagging along with Brother Wayne to various interfaith events. Everywhere he went, Brother Wayne was adored, treated like a holy man rock star. After finishing his talk, Brother Wayne would invite Kevin and me to the stage. "These are the leaders of the next generation, a Muslim and a Jew who are building the interfaith youth movement," he would say. Then he would move away from the microphone and whisper to us, "Tell them about the interfaith youth movement."

There were three problems with the position Brother Wayne put us in. First, Kevin and I were uncomfortable with being called a Muslim and a Jew. Actually, we were both trying to be Buddhists. One of the reasons we were drawn to Brother Wayne was his intimate knowledge of Eastern traditions. He was very close friends with the Dalai Lama's brother and had recently entered into a dialogue with His Holiness himself. Kevin and I wanted him to teach us meditation,
chanting, secrets, anything that seemed mysterious. The last thing we wanted was to be boxed into the traditions of our birth. We still harbored an adolescent discrimination against the familiar.

But Brother Wayne didn’t see boxes or borders. He happily taught us meditation techniques and introduced us to Hindu and Buddhist writers. He had spent years studying both traditions, and the encounter with them had served to strengthen his Catholic faith and help him rethink it along the way. He was, after all, a monk who taught at a Catholic seminary, took his vows very seriously, and had received a special honor from Chicago’s archbishop, Francis Cardinal George. The tradition you were born into was your home, Brother Wayne told me, but as Gandhi once wrote, it should be a home with the windows open so that the winds of other traditions can blow through and bring their unique oxygen. “It’s good to have wings,” he would say, “but you have to have roots, too.”

The second problem with the position Brother Wayne put Kevin and me in was that there was no interfaith youth movement, at least none that Kevin and I knew about. We were two twosomethings in Chicago exploring spirituality, diversity, community, and social justice. That hardly constituted a movement. Still, when Brother Wayne invited us to speak, we would look at each other and shrug and move to the mike. What else could we do but talk? “It’s like free-styling,” Kevin would say later, using a hip-hop term for making the story up as you go along, as long as it contains the truth.

We ended up articulating a zigzag of hopes. Shouldn’t we look at poetry and scripture from different religions and try to find the common pulse of love that ran through them? Shouldn’t we bring young people from radically different backgrounds—rich and poor, Easterner and Westerner, Arab and American—together to build community in diversity? Shouldn’t we follow the lead of Martin Luther King Jr. and Abraham Joshua Heschel, a Christian and a Jew, who had marched together in Selma, Alabama, for freedom, Heschel even saying, “I felt like my legs were praying”?

People loved our free-styling. We regularly got standing ovations.

Teachers would ask us to speak to their classes. Religious leaders wanted us to visit their congregations.

We started to feel a little uncomfortable with the attention. At one point, I made a confession to Brother Wayne: “There really isn’t an interfaith youth movement. Kevin and I are just dreaming out loud.”

He was unperturbed. “Even articulating the hope is helping to make it a reality. Keep praying for it and meeting people who feel like you do, and it will begin to take shape.”

The third problem with going to these events was that they were excruciatingly boring. They were always dinners or conferences with a lot of old people doing a lot of talking. The big goal seemed to be drafting documents declaring that religious people should be dialoguing with each other and planning the next conference for the document to be reviewed. It was always the same people saying the same things, and still the events went way too long. I remember one especially torturous interfaith dinner in Chicago. By the time the ninth speaker of the evening took the podium, the audience was long past being discreet about looking at their watches and had begun to shift noisily in their seats. The evening had proceeded like most interfaith activities: a couple of hundred people ranging from middle-aged to senior citizen picking at places of dry hotel food and listening to a long list of speakers repeat the same reasons interfaith activities are important. This speaker, a senior American religious leader, appeared to notice the restlessness and tried to bring new energy to the crowd. In a kind of singsongy shout, he declared, “This is so important what we are doing here. It is interfaith we are doing.” He paused while a look of delight crossed his face. “Yes, interfaith is doing. It is a verb. Repeat after me,” he said gleefully. “We are interfaithing.”

“Interfaithing,” mumbled about half the audience. The rest stared longingly at the door. Pretending not to notice the halfhearted response, the speaker plowed ahead through the reasons we must continue having annual interfaith banquets. “See you next year,” he said with a satisfied air.

Not only was I bored at these events, but I was also deflated. I
wanted so badly to be part of a movement that brought spirituality, diversity, and social action together in a very concrete way. At the heart of every social movement I studied—the civil rights movement, the struggle against apartheid in South Africa, the movement to free India—had been a group of religiously diverse people putting their skins on the line for social justice. Every leader I admired was deeply rooted in a different faith. I could not understand why the people at the interfaith events I attended seemed so thrilled that Buddhists, Hindus, Jews, Christians, and Muslims all gathered at one conference. My high school lunch table had had at least as much diversity. It baffled me that so much energy was spent on writing documents and creating interfaith ceremonies and positioning people onstage ever so carefully so that the photographs could come out looking like a Benetton ad. Where was the concrete commitment to social action, the stuff that our faith heroes had been about? And where were the young people?

Kevin and I were about fed up with interfaith events when we got a phone call from Charles Gibbs, the executive director of the United Religions Initiative (URI), an international interfaith organization based in San Francisco. Brother Wayne had told Charles that the interfaith movement had to involve more young people and that Kevin and I were building an interfaith youth movement in Chicago. Charles was calling to invite us to the URI's Global Summit. He gave us full scholarships to the conference and told us that there were going to be young people there from around the world who were interested in being part of the interfaith youth movement.

The URI had been formed in the mid-1990s by William Swing, then the Episcopal bishop of the diocese of California. The big idea was that interfaith work needed to include not just high-level religious leaders but also people at the grass roots, and that there had to be concrete, ongoing interfaith activities and not just international conferences. The job of a global organization would be to network various local interfaith groups and coordinate their activities.

The URI Global Summit was held at Stanford and was attended by people from several dozen countries around the world. The under-thirties skipped a lot of the conference sessions to spend time together. We had come from Malaysia, Ghana, Brazil, Argentina, and the United States. We were Hindus, Jews, Christians, Muslims, Baha'is, Buddhists, and practitioners of indigenous religions. In the discussions of our faith lives, two themes stood out: our faith formation had occurred in the midst of religious diversity, and serving others was a core part of how we lived our religions. A young Hindu woman called herself a "karma yogi," someone who seeks God through the path of actively serving others. Kevin talked about the connection between the Hindu call to service and the Jewish command of tikkun olam, repairing the world. A Malaysian Christian quoted from Matthew 25 and said that this is exactly what Jesus was about. I couldn't help but think of the conversation I had had with my parents about volunteering and their insistence that I serve because it was part of Islam.

The discussions went long into the night, and by the time I got back to my room, I was exhausted. But I couldn't sleep. It was a rare space that we had created at that conference: an open conversation about faith, diversity, and service. In other spaces, I had experienced pieces of these conversations, but never all the parts together. In college, I had been part of a lot of service learning efforts that brought people from diverse backgrounds together to build houses or tutor children, but we had never talked about faith. At Catholic Worker houses, there was much discussion of faith and service, but little talk of religious diversity. Thus far, my experience in the interfaith movement had included plenty of faith and diversity, but little attention to concrete service.

I was afraid that space would evaporate with the goodbye hugs at the end of the conference. How to continue it? I racked my brain late at night thinking about that. And suddenly, an idea hit me: what if we created a project where religiously diverse young people came together for one year in a residential community where they would live together and take part in community service projects? There were a number of faith-based efforts along these lines—Jesuit Volunteer
Corps, Lutheran Volunteer Corps, and a parallel Jewish volunteer program called Avodah. They connected faith and service but had no religious diversity. Moreover, there were programs like City Year, Teach for America, and Public Allies that deliberately brought people from different races, classes, genders, and geographic backgrounds together to engage in community development efforts (although they were generally not residential programs), but faith was largely ignored. And then there was the interfaith movement, where people from different religious backgrounds came together, but they seemed intent on focusing on organizing conferences, curating ceremonies, and drafting documents. An Interfaith Youth Corps would learn from all of these efforts while creating something genuinely new.

It was about three in the morning. Four more hours, and I would be able to tell other people about this.

Ideas become reality when the right people commit to them. There are two categories of the "right people"—mentors and peers. Mentors are people with resources, networks, and wisdom. They guide you, encourage you, and connect you. In One Day, All Children . . ., Wendy Kopp describes the various mentors who helped launch Teach for America. The chair of Princeton’s sociology department, Marvin Bressler, immediately saw the potential of the idea. He set up a meeting with Princeton’s director of development so that Wendy could learn about fundraising. The director of development agreed to have Princeton act as Teach for America’s fiscal agent. Richard Fisher, a fellow Princeton alum and the CEO of Morgan Stanley, gave Wendy a sympathetic ear and free office space. The founders of City Year, Michael Brown and Alan Khazei, provided ongoing strategic advice, including the all-important counsel "just say no" when other people ask you to change your mission even a tiny bit. The little things made a big difference. Wendy writes about a corporate executive who called her and said, "Wendy, I just read your proposal. It’s stunning." That phone call energized her for a week.

Thankfully, the URI Global Summit was a world of friendly mentors. Charles Gibbs had watched the young people sneak out of conference sessions with a twinkle in his eye. When I cornered him at breakfast with the idea of the Interfaith Youth Corps, he said, "I was wondering what you all were cooking up." Jim Kenney, a longtime supporter of youth participation in interfaith work, listened intently to the idea and suggested a practical next step: that different interfaith organizations contribute money to a youth conference where the details could be further discussed. Joe Hall, a conference participant who came from a community development and arts background, spent an entire afternoon with me discussing how to make this idea happen. He gave me exactly what I needed at the time: his belief that the Interfaith Youth Corps idea was both powerful and possible, and his counsel that anger-based activism goes only a fraction of the distance that compassion-based approaches do.

Even more important than the support of mentors, I needed the companionship of my peers. I wanted to make sure that I wasn’t crazy when I said that young people desired a space to connect faith, diversity, and service and that my initial sketch for an Interfaith Youth Corps met that need. Wendy Kopp writes that throughout all the early trials of creating Teach for America, her most important connection was to her peers who were committed to educational equality in America. I felt the same love from my peers at the Global Summit. "That’s exactly what our generation needs to be about," said my friend Paithi, a Malaysian Christian. "Yeah, man, make that thing happen," said Socrates, an African Traditionalist from Ghana. Our conference discussions began focusing on the shape of this project. As the end of the conference loomed, a big question hung in the air: who would do what when we all scattered back home? I repeated the offer made by Jim Kenney and Charles Gibbs to help fund an interfaith youth conference and committed to take the lead on it. Other people stated what they could do. I left the conference with an idea, a burning passion, and a group of mentors and peers ready to making it a reality.

Kevin and I went to see Brother Wayne about the Interfaith Youth Corps as soon as we got back to Chicago. He could barely contain
himself as we described it. When he finally calmed down, he started plotting strategy. “Well, after the corps frees Tibet, it can start working on the environment. Those are the two biggest crises of our time, and their causes are spiritual. The solutions have to be spiritual, too.”

He was quiet for a moment. “You know who will want to hear about this?” he suddenly said. “His Holiness.” He stood up abruptly, pointed his finger in the air, and proclaimed, “You have to go to Dharmsala and tell His Holiness about the Interfaith Youth Corps. You have to get his blessing before you do anything else.”

5
An American in India

What is my inheritance? To what am I an heir?
To all that humanity has achieved during tens of thousands of years, to all that it has thought and felt and suffered and taken pleasure in, to its cries of triumph and its bitter agony of defeat, to that astonishing adventure of man which began so long ago and yet continues and beckons us. To all this and more in common with all men. But there is a special heritage for those of us of India, one more especially applicable.

JAWAHARLAL NEHRU, The Discovery of India

Before boarding the plane on my previous trip to India, when I was fifteen, I asked my father if they had Frosted Flakes there. “I don’t think so,” he replied. Then how could I be expected to stay for six weeks?
I was openly contemptuous of India during that family trip. Thumbs Up Cola didn’t taste at all like Coke, and the paper straw I sucked it through was too small to get a good gulp in. There was no shower in my grandmother’s home. Bathing was a primitive affair that
consisted of putting water in a bucket and pouring it over yourself with a pitcher. The air conditioners made too much noise. The fans just blew the heat around. India was a land of filth, nuisance, and backwardness.

In Bombay, where my extended family is based, I spent my days inside my aunt’s apartment reading Ayn Rand novels and outlining my college application essays. My cousins offered to take me out at night but soon got tired of my attitude. “Remember, tell them not to put ice in your drink,” Bathool told me at a juice bar on Chowpatty Beach, doing her best to protect my American stomach from a case of the runs. “What the hell is wrong with this place that you can’t even have the ice?” I responded.

When we went touring in the north, through Agra and Jaipur, the only hour I didn’t complain was when we were at the Taj Mahal. My white friends at school had asked me to tell them what it was like; I paid attention so I could report back. The rest of the time, I cursed the searing heat; the sticky dirt; the stinking, heaving crush of brown bodies around me. I threw a tantrum when I discovered that we had been bumped from our original flight and would have to wait an extra two days before returning. “I just want to go home,” I whined like a five-year-old to my parents.

And now I was going back to India. Six years separated the journeys. I was embarrassed by my behavior on my previous trip, but most of all I was angry at America. After all, it was America that had seduced me into adopting its styles and its scorn, forced me to sacrifice my true heritage in a devil’s bargain for acceptance, and then laughed viciously when it slowly dawned on me that I would never be anything but a second-class citizen there. But I had become wise to the ways of the empire. Who says the master’s tools could not dismantle the master’s house? In the very universities and bookstores of superpower, I had discovered its malicious trickster methods. My return was a reclaiming of my lost heritage, a reuniting with my people and my land, an inhabiting of the identity that had remained in my bones even when I had tried to scrub my dark skin white. I read about Gandhi’s rejection of the European mindset in favor of all things Indian and fantasized about wearing homespun and walking barefoot through rural India. I thought about Malcolm X meeting with his dark-skinned brothers in Africa and beginning his movement toward Pan-Africanism, and I wondered whether, after this sojourn to my motherland, I might not do the same.

The servants were awake when Kevin and I arrived in the middle of the night at my grandmother’s in Colaba, a bustling neighborhood in South Bombay. They were huddled around the television, watching reruns of Diff’rent Strokes dubbed in Hindi. They cried when they saw me, the two older ones taking turns kissing and hugging and reaching up to touch my face. “They took care of you when you were a baby, and now they are seeing you grown,” my grandmother explained. “That is why they are crying. They have been with our family for nearly fifty years. This one, Nissir bhai, he would take you on walks at night when you wouldn’t sleep. And that one, Amin bai, she would sit and feed you your food and be so patient when you refused to eat. They did the same for your father when he was a little boy.” My grandmother then put a garland of flowers around my neck and welcomed me home: “This is your city; this is your apartment. Sit, be comfortable.” My cousins came; my aunts arrived. More hugs, more tears, more cheek pinching and head patting. I was home.

After breakfast, Kevin and I were ready for India. “We want to go buy Indian clothes,” I told my family.

“But the best blue jeans you get in the States,” my cousin Saleem said. I didn’t quite understand what he was saying.

“Blue jeans,” he repeated, as if I hadn’t heard. “That’s what everybody wears here.”

“I want Indian clothes,” I repeated. “The kind my father used to wear only at night because he was too embarrassed to wear them out in America because it is a racist country.”
“You mean pajamas?” Saleem asked. I gave up on him and made the same request to my grandmother.

She also looked confused but gave instructions to Amin bai to take us shopping. Kevin and I climbed into the back of a hired car with her, and off we went. It was my first encounter with the Other World.

“Watch out! Watch out!” I said, alarm rising in my voice as the driver barely missed a bicyclist on the right. Then I realized that he had swerved to avoid the bus careening down the street on our left. There were three similar near misses before we reached the first traffic light, at which point there were about three more because none of the cars, trucks, bicyclists, pedestrians, or various animals followed the signal. Each time we nearly grazed another vehicle, I let out a little yelp. The driver calmly chewed his betel nuts and spat them out the window. “American?” he asked Amin bai.

“Mmm,” she grunted, and wagged her head side to side—Hindi for yes.

I decided my best strategy was to try to ignore the road and concentrate on Amin bai. She had taken care of me when I was a baby; the least I could do was find out what was happening in her life. “How are you?” I asked.

It took a moment for her to register my question, both because it tested the limits of her English and because Indian servants are generally not asked about their lives. Amin bai seemed delighted to catch me up and launched into a stream of colorful Hindi. I didn’t understand a word, but I didn’t want that to stop me from making a connection with my past, my people. I nodded vigorously whenever I thought it was appropriate. Amin bai must have taken it as a good sign because she kept on talking. At one point, she pointed to her mouth and smiled widely. I smiled back and nodded, overjoyed at the thought that our connection had overcome the language barrier. Amin bai paused, and her face changed from pure happiness to slight confusion. I didn’t want to lose the energy, so I smiled even wider and nodded even faster. Amin bai shrugged, popped her fingers in her mouth, removed her teeth, and placed them in my hand. “Brand-new,” she said, the only English she had spoken all morning, and smiled giddily.

It was Indian travel that convinced me that going native would be harder than I had thought. The eight-hour bus ride from Chandigarh to Kangra started off fine. We were amused to be sharing the vehicle with chickens in cages and a couple of small goats. The bus conductor kept on rolling and smoking funny-smelling cigarettes, and occasionally walking up the aisle to hand one to the driver. Kevin found a sadhu, a Hindu holy man who gives up all his possessions to wander and worship, in the back of the bus and did his best to have a conversation with him. The sadhu seemed delighted with his new pupil and began lecturing in a stream of mostly Hindi infected with small amounts of English. I decided to play a little game with myself: how many minutes before one of them says a complete sentence the other understands?

We drank water. Lots of it. Gallons and gallons. It was the one piece of advice everybody gave us wherever we went. Unfortunately, they had failed to remind us of an equally important consideration: finding a bathroom. An hour into the journey, I felt myself needing to go. I surveyed the situation. The bus hadn’t actually come to a complete stop yet. People seemed to get on and off while it was still moving. Was there any way to communicate my issue to the driver or conductor? I had no idea what the words were. What about sign language? Hmmm, a dangerous idea. What was I going to do, wave at the conductor and point to my groin? Maybe that was the worst type of insult you could give somebody in India. Maybe the conductor would have to kill me to preserve his honor. I decided against it.

And now the slight pressure in my bladder felt like a river roaring behind a dam. We were an hour and a half into an eight-hour journey. What had started off as a fun roller coaster ride was starting to take on dark overtones. Our bus driver insisted on passing every vehicle on
our side of the road, which usually put him on a collision course with a Tata truck coming from the other direction. The two drivers would furiously honk their horns and then swerve away at the last second. The bus driver would calmly take another puff of his hashish, then prepare to do it again. This was beginning to wear on me. My ass was starting to hurt, because the seat was basically a strip of imitation leather over cheap metal. I tried to find a position that minimized the pressure on my bladder, but it hurt my back too much to stay in it. I decided I needed to involve Kevin. I interrupted his pantomime conversation with the sadhu and said, “Listen, the next time the pothead driver slows this bus down, I’m going to jump off and find a place to pee. Can you make sure the bus doesn’t leave without me?”

Kevin was skeptical, but I was clear with him that Plan B would displease all creatures on the bus except possibly the goats. We are living in a world of bad choices, I told him, and I needed his help to make the best of those bad choices work. Fifteen minutes later, I saw a few people pick up their bags, grab their children, and crouch by the door, waiting to jump off when the bus hit its slowest point. I crouched with them, absolutely gleeful at the thought of the relief ahead. We jumped together. I pulled my zipper down as I ran to a concrete wall where I saw several other men peeing. There were small pools of urine everywhere, with pieces of feces lying around. It could have been heaven. I started my stream, turned to my right, and saw my bus doing its best to avoid a herd of cows as it merged back into traffic. Kevin was frantically running up and down the aisle, trying to get both the driver’s attention and the conductor’s, pointing to me and then to my bags, doing his best to indicate that I was still hoping to be a passenger. I saw a row of faces sitting on the bus looking at me, with slightly amused expressions.

It took an almost spiritual willpower to stop myself in midstream, chase the bus down, and zip up at the same time. Thank God for that herd of cows, or I would never have caught up to the bus. When I climbed back on, the conductor didn’t even look up to acknowledge me. He just kept calmly rolling another joint.

Kevin was furious. “Don’t ever do that again,” he said. “They think I’m crazy here. This guy is never going to talk to me now.” He pointed to the sadhu. It was true; the sadhu appeared to be meditating.

I was forlorn. My back was killing me, my ass felt raw, and my bladder was still about to explode. I sat down again, trying to ignore the mocking smiles of my fellow passengers. “Why don’t you just focus on your fucking goats,” I wanted to tell them.

A very sad thought crossed my mind. I had done all kinds of reading on the nature of exile before coming to India. I had fancied myself in the class of people who were condemned to live in a land that was not their own, like Edward Said, the Palestinian in New York City. I had spent hours musing about the concept of “home.” I was especially drawn to Robert Frost’s celebrated line: “Home is the place where, when you have to go there, / They have to take you in.” Now I had something to contribute to that literature: if you cannot tell a bus driver that he has to stop the bus so you can take a leak, the land you are in is not your home.

I had deeper discomforts with India. To begin with, the very idea of servants. Three of them waited on my grandmother. They slept on thin mats in the living room and kitchen; ran to her when she rang the bell in her bedroom; swept the floors; cleaned the bathrooms; did the laundry and the dishes; cooked and served and took away the food. “Mama [our grandmother] lives very simply,” Saleem told me when he came over for lunch one day.

“What are you talking about?” I asked. “She has three servants. Who the hell needs three servants?”

“You have no idea how the rich in this country live. They have three servants for every room, every function of the household. They have servants just to show off their status. And they treat their servants like nonhumans. These three aren’t just servants,” he said, gesturing toward Amin bai, Nassir bhai, and Gulshan. “They are almost a part of the family. Mama has saved their lives.”

I just shook my head. All I saw was three people waiting on one
person, and I couldn’t get used to it. Every morning after prayers, the servants would set the table and bring us mugs of hot masala tea and plates full of fried eggs and chewy toast. After breakfast, Kevin and I would stack our plates and mugs and try to bring them to the kitchen. “No, no, no,” said Gulshan, the youngest and most educated of the servants, who could read and speak English. “Cleaning is for us to do. You relax, be comfortable.”

The servants never used the same bathrooms we did. They did not drink tea from the same mugs. After we finished our meals, I walked by the kitchen and saw the three of them sitting on the floor eating theirs. I couldn’t help but think of Langston Hughes’s poem “I, Too, Sing America,” in which he imagines a day when the house slave is no longer banished to the kitchen to eat, but sits at the table with everyone else. It made me sick to watch such blatant inequality.

When Kevin and I went to the home that Mama owned in Nargol, a small village in Gujarat, two additional people suddenly materialized to take us. “They will cook and clean for you in Nargol,” she told me.

When we got to the train station, they handed Kevin and me our first-class tickets and gestured that they would meet us at the end of the journey. Then the two old women picked up our bags and waddled off to the third-class compartment. I felt like a slave driver watching them go, but I was helpless to stop them.

When we arrived in Nargol, the two servants became a whirlwind of activity, one making the beds and sweeping the floors, the other beginning a feast in the kitchen. That night, I woke up to use the bathroom and discovered I had to go through the servants’ quarters to get there. I crept along on tiptoe as quietly as I could, doing my best not to disturb them, but my foot hit something solid, and I tripped. I heard screaming and felt hands grabbing my leg. Somebody turned on the light, and then we were all laughing. The servants had been sleeping on the floor, and I had tripped over them. I wagged my head back and forth, the universal Indian gesture of relationship, did my business, and returned to my room. But before I fell asleep, I realized something:

There was a bed in the other room, and it was empty. Neither of the servants was sleeping in it. They had chosen to sleep on the floor, next to the empty bed. They could not conceive of it as their lot in life to sleep in a bed. Gulshan’s line whenever Kevin and I picked up our plates from the table flashed into my head: “Cleaning is for us to do.”

Every interaction in India was a lesson in the class structure. While munching on masala veggie burgers at the Café Royale near the Regal Cinema in Bombay, I asked Saleem where a college student like him got his spending money. “My parents give it to me,” he answered.

“Would you ever do this?” I asked, motioning to the young men dressed in crisp white shirts who were ferrying food back and forth to tables.

Saleem almost choked on his sandwich. “Don’t be crazy, boss,” he said. “Nobody I know waits tables. Very few people I know in college even have jobs. They all get pocket money from their parents. These people are a different class.” He waved his hand in the direction of the waiters and took another bite of his food.

I couldn’t help but think that everybody I knew in America waited tables or had some other kind of job in their high school and college years. But class worked differently in India. Labor lacked dignity. I thought of an older cousin of mine, Aftab, who had left India for America several years earlier. In India, he was the partying type, constantly shooting pool and riding his motorcycle up and down Bombay’s Marine Drive. He was never very interested in education. When he arrived in America, he got a job as an exterminator and worked overtime for almost two years. Then he and a partner bought a convenience store. A year later, he bought his partner out and started looking into another business opportunity, gas stations. He now owns four in West Palm Beach, Florida. In India, none of this would have happened for him because he would never have taken the manual labor job to begin with. Aftab hires recent immigrants and offers the best workers a cut of the business, which gives them the opportunity to climb the ladder the way he did.
My confusion about the separation between the servant class and the upper middle class revealed a quintessentially American point of view. Status is much more fluid in America, at least within the wide range of the population that can loosely be characterized as middle-class. I wait tables at a restaurant, and after my shift is over, I go out to a lounge and someone waits on me. Even if I get a graduate degree and earn a six-figure salary, I don’t treat waiters like a permanently lower class. After all, I was one and know what it feels like. And who knows when someone serving me in this restaurant will get their own graduate degree and be my boss. Better to be friendly.

My “American-ness” was starting to stare me in the face in India: not the America of big-screen televisions and Hummers, but the America that, despite its constant failings, managed to inculcate in its citizens a set of humanizing values—the dignity of labor, the fundamental equality of human beings, mobility based on drive and talent, the opportunity to create and contribute.

Someone once told me that the most penetrating exploration of the relationship between identity and nation is found in the writing of James Baldwin. I had brought several books of his essays with me to India, eager to discover in his writing a map for myself. In college, I had looked to black writers for fire. I had identified with their anger and alienation and had carefully crafted an oppositional identity based on their example. Baldwin had walked the same path and had become so consumed by his anger that he left America for Europe to escape the indignity of segregated coffee shops and the brutality of Harlem police officers. But he found that Europe was a stranger to him. When he was mistakenly identified as a thief in Paris and taken to a French jail, he had a morbid wish to be going through the ordeal in the cells of Harlem, where at least he knew how to interpret the facial expressions of the cops. When he met North Africans in the streets of Paris, he realized that they were not his brothers any more than white Parisians were. They did not share his experience of alienation, his anger, or his ache for acceptance. Their mothers had sung them different songs. It was Americans of all walks of life, black intellectuals and white country boys, that Baldwin understood. He followed the logic of this observation and realized that as murderous as America had been to his ancestors, it was the only place that he could call home. Baldwin, like Martin Luther King Jr. and Langston Hughes, made of that surprising fact an opportunity: He started to view himself as a citizen with a stake in the success of America. “I am not a ward of America; I am one of the first Americans to arrive on these shores,” he wrote. And he started to realize that the experience of blacks in America had provided them with “a special attitude”—an attitude that had given rise to America’s only indigenous expressions, blues and jazz, and some of its most significant heroes, ranging from Frederick Douglass to Harriet Tubman. Black people had been prevented from integrating into American society and had somehow still managed to have a profound impact on the American imagination.

The idea of America was worth fighting for. An experience with an extreme form of an oppositional identity convinced Baldwin of this. He was invited to the home of Elijah Muhammad, the leader of the Nation of Islam. The Nation, Baldwin observed, was not like other angry black organizations in Harlem. White cops didn’t rough people up at Nation rallies. They stood in formation at a safe distance, faces set stoically ahead while Nation preachers spoke about the blue-eyed devil, too scared of the intensity and discipline on display to attempt their typical brutality. Elijah Muhammad’s ideology was most certainly warped, but Baldwin was impressed by the allegiance it had attracted. Moreover, he was disgusted that white people refused to see the reason for this. After centuries of slavery and subjugation, white Americans were still unable to imagine the anger that seethed within black people. It existed in Baldwin also. He accepted Elijah Muhammad’s dinner invitation to determine whether their anger was the same.

The dinner was a regal affair. Nation members, dark and intense, filled the room, the women separated from the men. There was an overwhelming power in Elijah Muhammad’s presence. It was time to
stop being brainwashed and come to his true self, he told Baldwin. A series of slow, penetrating commands ensued, each followed by a chorus of “Yes, that’s right” from the Nation members who surrounded them. Then came the condemnations—of white people, of Christians, of intermarriage, of restaurants where alcohol was served and blacks mingled with whites—all accompanied by the same “Yes, that’s right” chorus. Any interaction with the enemy was a denial of the true black self. And then Elijah Muhammad laid out a vision built on this ideology: finding the land to create a black society with a $20 billion economy. In other words, total separation.

The Nation was fast becoming a mass movement with a deeply devoted core of true believers. If Elijah Muhammad made a serious attempt at this goal, tens of thousands might well jump off the cliff with him.

Baldwin understood that this was Elijah Muhammad’s response to the racism he had experienced, but his plan was a disaster waiting to happen—not only because it would be impossible to separate people who were so intimately connected economically but also because the plan violated a spiritual principle: namely, human beings were meant to be diverse, and they were meant to live together. America’s sin was not just the gross inequality with which the black race had been treated but also its creation of barriers between people. Still, Baldwin felt that there was a chance that America could be redeemed and become a place where people from everywhere collectively created a home. Near the end of The Fire Next Time, Baldwin wrote, “If we—and now I mean the relatively conscious whites and the relatively conscious blacks, who must, like lovers, insist on, or create, the consciousness of the others—do not falter in our duty now, we may be able, handful that we are, to end the racial nightmare, and achieve our country, and change the history of the world.”

In college, I had understood identity as a box to lock myself in and a bat to bludgeon America with. I was seduced by the notion that we belonged to a tribe based on the identity of our birth, that our loyalty rested exclusively with the tribe, and that one day my tribe of dark-skinned third world people would rise over our white oppressors. I may well have been a candidate for Elijah Muhammad’s separate society. But here was James Baldwin, whose ancestors had been enslaved and who knew more about the brutality of white racism than I could ever imagine, saying that love between people of different identities was not only possible but necessary, and that we had to insist on it. Here was a black man who had been chased out of restaurants because he had the temerity to ask for a cup of coffee from the front counter, rejecting separatism in favor of the hope of pluralism, a society where people from different backgrounds worked together, protected one another, sought to achieve something more meaningful for all. Here was a man who viewed identity as a bridge to the possibility of pluralism.

Richard Rodriguez once wrote that Thomas Jefferson, that democrat, was a slaveholder. And Thomas Jefferson, that slaveholder, was a democrat. America embodied that same trauma of contradictions. In college, I had viewed it as my responsibility to expose America’s shadow side. But too much emphasis in that direction risked seeing only shadow in the American story and, worse, believing that there was nothing but darkness in its future. That’s a cop-out, Baldwin was saying. I realized that it was precisely because of America’s glaring imperfections that I should seek to participate in its progress, carve a place in its promise, and play a role in its possibility. And at its heart and at its best, America was about pluralism.

In a strange way, Baldwin’s writing on America helped me understand my relationship with India. I relieved India of the burden of being my haven, and I relieved myself of the responsibility of being the reincarnation of Gandhi. My heritage as an Indian in America gave me a special relationship with the country of my citizenship. Why couldn’t my citizenship in America provide me with a unique way of relating to the land of my heritage?

My eyes started to adjust. The street scenes that had seemed like nothing but madness two weeks earlier had come into a little more focus. It was not simply random chaos happening on Colaba Causeway,
the road that runs between my grandmother’s flat and the famous Taj Hotel. It was a thousand carnivals spinning simultaneously and sometimes crashing into one another. There was the carnival of business: ear cleaners, pan wallas, single-cigarette dealers, street barbers, sidewalk book merchants. There was the carnival of food: little boys in rags carrying cha and tiffins from office building to office building, sweet meats stacked in display windows, college students lined up outside makeshift dosa stands, kholi women carrying baskets of fish on their heads and bellowing, “Machi! Machi!” There was the carnival of fashion: young men on motorcycles wearing flared jeans and loose-fitting cotton shirts, young women experimenting with bright styles that mixed India and America, stores advertising bridal outfits and others displaying matching jewelry. There were carnivals of furtive lovers, sidewalk families, street animals, and child beggars. And despite the desperation of so much of life in Bombay, most people seemed happy. They drank tea in cafés, played cards on the sidewalks, bartered playfully in markets, got high on holidays, danced to Hindi music, and dreamed of becoming film stars.

I had picked up enough of the language to have a workable patois of Hindi, English, and hand waving—enough to get me where I was going most of the time. Kevin and I had convinced the servants to teach us how to make chapattis (flat, unleavened breads), which meant they no longer saw us only as lords. It was a far cry from being equals, but it felt much more comfortable to our American minds. We were having a great time with Saleem and Zohra, my two cousins who were only slightly younger than we were. The faculty at their college had conveniently gone on strike during the stretch that Kevin and I were in Bombay, so the two of them and their friends became our social group.

We read for hours every day. We went through stacks of Indian literature: nonfiction by Naipaul, novels by Rushdie, speeches by Vivekananda, poems by Tagore, a history of India by Nehru, various biographies of Gandhi, and, because of our audience with His Holiness, everything we could get our hands on about Tibet, the Dalai Lama, and Buddhism. We split our time between the carnivals of India outside and the idea of India inside. And the more I immersed myself in Indian civilization, the more I recognized the faint outlines of myself in its vast mirror.

I found myself rejecting Naipaul’s cold, exacting pessimism of India—that it was a million mutinies and an area of darkness. Somehow, amid its poverty and filth, India danced. Naipaul seemed incapable of seeing that joy as anything but an opiate. Perhaps he had no rhythm.

I was drawn to the hopefulness expressed by other Indian writers, to their visions of what India could be, what it was meant to be. I loved their ability to weave the worlds of ancient religious texts and village life and the Mughal Empire into a garment of possibility. Here was Rushdie’s protagonist in Midnight’s Children, Saleem Sinai, hosting conferences of the children born at the moment of India’s liberation—Hindus and Muslims and Sikhs; the sons of beggars and the daughters of successful businessmen—each of them holding forth on what her country’s identity should be. The evil work of the antagonist of the novel, Shiva, was to destroy the dialogue.

Indeed, the common theme that ran through these hopeful visions was India as a civilization whose diverse communities were in deep dialogue with one another. The emperor Ashoka, who, more than two thousand years ago, managed both to spread Buddhism and to encourage interfaith discussions, said, “Other sects should be duly honored in every way on all occasions.” The sixteenth-century Muslim emperor Akbar invited leaders and scholars from all of India’s various religions to debate one another in his court, scenes of which are depicted in paintings that have come to be considered characteristic of Indian art. For centuries, persecuted religious communities—Parsees, Tibetan Buddhists, Jews, and Baha’is—have found India’s doors open to them. The great poet and contemporary of Gandhi, Rabindranath Tagore, wrote that the “idea of India” itself militates “against the intense consciousness of the separateness of one’s own people from others.”

The dream of India is the dream of pluralism, the idea of different
communities retaining their uniqueness while relating in a way that recognizes they share universal values. It is a dream I recognized from the writings of James Baldwin. It is the American dream also. And just as America has sinned against its dream with slavery and racism, India has violated its promise with religious nationalism.

It was a sin my family knew well. In January 1993, the Hindu nationalist Shiv Sena organized groups of saffron-clad thugs to terrorize the Muslim population of Bombay. My cousin Saleem saw one of these groups armed with machetes pull down the pants of a little boy. Saleem turned and ran as fast as he could, but he still heard the scream. His parents had told him about these murders. Chanting Hindu nationalist slogans, the Shiv Sena marauders surrounded young boys and pulled their pants down. If they were circumcised, it meant they were Muslim, which meant they were dead.

For Saleem's parents, my aunt and uncle, this was the final straw. They locked themselves in their apartments, taking their nameplates, which marked them as Muslims, off their mailboxes so that the roving mobs would not know who lived there. They lived that way for several weeks, not going to work or school, afraid for their lives, afraid of their city.

In 1998, the year I returned to India, the BJP, a Hindu nationalist political party, was elected into national office. They had whipped up a frenzy of support from certain Hindu groups by stating that, centuries earlier, a Muslim emperor had destroyed a Hindu temple, which they claimed was the birthplace of a Hindu god, and had built a mosque over the rubble. The second in command of the BJP had led a campaign to destroy the mosque, a move that many Hindus in India saw as both patriotic and faithful, the very definition of religious nationalism.

I remember one of my aunts expressing dismay and concern over the election: "This is bad for Muslims; it is bad for Hindus; it is bad for India." I don't think I even knew what bad. Under the BJP, India exploded a nuclear bomb, the "Hindu bomb" it was called. Pakistan followed with its own nuclear test. Tensions between the two nations, which had fought three wars in the past half century, rose dramatically. That made life more difficult for Muslims in India. Although India has just about as many Muslims, 130 million, as Pakistan, the Hindu nationalist rhetoric coming from the government constantly questioned their loyalty to the nation.

The BJP's allies started weaving Hindu nationalism into the fabric of Indian life. They changed textbooks to teach the Hindu nationalist line. Muslims found it harder to get certain jobs. Police forces, some very much in the control of Hindu nationalist elements, became more brazen in their brutality toward Muslims. A few years later, in 2002, Hindu nationalist groups in Gujarat, a state run by a strong BJP ally, went on a murder spree that took the lives of about two thousand Muslims. In some places, the police force stood by and watched. In others, it actively aided and abetted the murder. Almost no one has been prosecuted. The governor of the state, Narendra Modi, won his reelection campaign later that year.

Gandhi, a devout Hindu, had long maintained that Hindu-Muslim unity was just as important to him as a free India. His murderer was a member of a Hindu nationalist organization, the RSS. In the fury and sadness that followed the assassination of the father of the nation, the articulator of its dream of freedom and pluralism, the Hindu nationalists went underground. But they returned with a vengeance in the 1990s, and it was not just Muslims that they were targeting, but the very idea of India itself.

One of the proudest moments in India's recent history was its granting refuge to the Dalai Lama when he was forced to flee Chinese occupation of his native Tibet. Buddhism was founded in India but had nearly disappeared over the centuries. The Dalai Lama brought it back. He set up his government in exile in Dharamsala, a small city in the foothills of the Himalayas which attracted an eclectic mix of old Tibetan monks and young Western seekers. It was here that Kevin and I traveled for our audience with His Holiness.

What do you say to the Dalai Lama when you are with him? It is a
question worthy of a Zen koan. We met with His Holiness in the visiting room of his small palace. He presented us with the traditional Tibetan white scarves and said he had heard of us from Brother Wayne. We spent a moment drinking in his presence with our eyes.

His Holiness was in a playful mood. He reached out and put his index finger on the chain that Kevin was wearing around his neck, a string of beads with a small bowl on the end, given to him by a Native American couple at the United Religions Initiative conference. “Emptiness,” the Dalai Lama said. “I like it.” And then he giggled.

“I spent many years studying the concept of emptiness in Buddhism,” Kevin explained. “Ultimately, it brought me back to a similar notion in Judaism—the idea of ayin, which means that God was once the entirety of creation, and the universe as we know it was brought about when God contracted Himself. That contraction caused a shattering of light across the world, and we human beings are carriers of that light.”

The Dalai Lama listened intently and nodded. “Yes,” he said, “this is a very spiritual concept. You are a Jew?”

“Yes,” Kevin said. He finally felt comfortable embracing that identity. He still practiced Buddhist meditation and read widely in other religions, but it was clear that his roots were in Judaism. Somehow, the things Brother Wayne had told us—that studying other religions should first and foremost have the effect of strengthening our understanding of our own—had sunk in for Kevin. More and more, I saw Kevin with his nose in a book about Judaism. He would constantly tell me about Jewish spirituality and social justice theology, comparing Jewish concepts to ideas in other religions. He always ended with a diatribe against the Hebrew school he had gone to when he was younger: “Why didn’t my rabbi teach us this stuff? All he ever talked about was rituals and Jewish choseness, never Jewish social justice.”

The Dalai Lama seemed happy. “Judaism is a very good religion,” he said. “I have many Jewish friends. We have interfaith dialogue. I learn a lot from them. Judaism and Buddhism are very much alike. You should learn more about both and become a better Jew.” I have never seen Kevin look happier. The Dalai Lama reached over and touched the beads around his neck again and then rubbed his head and laughed.

Then he turned to me. I started getting a little nervous. I knew what was coming. The Dalai Lama was about to ask me about my religion. He had just commended Kevin for deepening his Jewish identity. Somehow I didn’t think he was going to be impressed with my story of trying to be a Buddhist. Yet try as I might, I just could not get the hang of it. I had a little secret that I hadn’t even told Kevin: I was a total failure at Buddhist meditation. Our version of it was to sit cross-legged and quietly focus on nothingness. By the time I got my legs in order and my back straight and I took my first full breath, a thought would enter my mind. I would try to shove it out. But halfway through my next breath, another thought would penetrate. I spent the whole time I was meditating shoving thoughts out of my head and being mad at myself for being a bad Buddhist. Those thoughts were my greatest enemy. My Western materialist upbringing was preventing me from entering the original mind.

Lately, though, I had gotten tired of shoving thoughts out of my head, and I had allowed one to linger long enough to get a sense of what it was. I could not have been more shocked at the discovery: “Ya Ali, Ya Muhammad”—the prayer that my mother had taught me when I was a child, the prayer that was meant to help me fall asleep and keep me safe through the night. The realization started me. It had been such a long time since I had said that prayer intentionally, but here it was floating in my head, still woven into my being. I decided to let it stay, even if it didn’t abide by the rules we had made up and called Buddhist meditation. I knew my intention was pure, even if I wasn’t skilled at creating and focusing on nothingness.

But after hearing the Dalai Lama and Kevin talk about Judaism and Buddhism, I started forming a different theory about my Buddhist meditation. Maybe, as Kevin’s study of Buddhist concepts had helped him understand Jewish concepts, my novice foray into Buddhist meditation had inadvertently returned me to Muslim prayer. The Ismailis
are a spiritualist Muslim community with an emphasis on meditation, and one of our techniques is to focus the mind on a particular Muslim prayer word or phrase. Perhaps Buddhist meditation had brought the Muslim spirituality from deep within me to the surface. Perhaps this was God’s gentle way of telling me something.

When the Dalai Lama opened his mouth, it wasn’t to ask a question; it was to make a statement. “You are a Muslim,” he said. Brother Wayne must have told him. Or maybe the Dalai Lama’s brother, with whom we were staying in Dharamsala. Or, really, who knows how the Dalai Lama found out. I imagine Dalai Lamas know some things that the rest of us don’t.

“You are a Muslim,” the Dalai Lama repeated.

“Yes,” I said, then swallowed. The Dalai Lama giggled. “Islam is a very good religion. Buddhists and Muslims lived in peace in Tibet for many centuries. First, there were only Tibetan Buddhists. Now there are Tibetan Muslims, too. You should visit them.”

Kevin and I spent a few minutes talking about the Interfaith Youth Corps, how it hoped to bring young people from different religions together to serve others.

“This is very important,” the Dalai Lama said, suddenly growing serious. “Religions must dialogue, but even more, they must come together to serve others. Service is the most important. And common values, finding common values between different religions. And as you study the other religions, you must learn more about your own and believe more in your own. This Interfaith Youth Corps is a very good project.”

And then he turned slightly to face Kevin and me together. “Jew,” he said, and nodded at Kevin. “Muslim,” he said, and nodded at me. “Buddhist,” he said, and nodded at himself and his secretary. “This is interfaith. Now we have to serve others. But we”—the Dalai Lama pointed to his secretary and himself—“are not young. Can we still join?”

He sent us away laughing and floating and believing.

In The Jew in the Lotus, Rodger Kamenetz writes that many young people view religion as an old man saying no. Growing up, my “old man” was a woman—my grandmother, with whom I was now staying in Bombay. She would come to the States every few years and live with my family, occupying the living room from midmorning to early evening watching Hindi films. I avoided her as much as possible. “Are you saying your Du’a?” she would ask if she caught me before I managed to reach the back staircase. If she woke up earlier than usual and saw me at the breakfast table before I left for school, she would say, “Are you giving your dasoon?” referring to the tithe that Ismailis give. She was disappointed that I had no close Ismaili friends when I was a teenager. “You will marry an Ismaili, right?” my grandmother would ask, catching my arm, as I was sneaking out. I am embarrassed to say it now, but I dreaded her visits and did my best to avoid her.

My view of her changed dramatically on this trip to India. She spent most of her days sitting on a simple sofa bed in the living room, clad in white, tasbih in hand, beads flowing through her fingers, whispering the name of God—“Allah, Allah, Allah”—over and over. She would cry during prayer, the name of the Prophet causing an overflow of love from deep in her heart. I told her all about the Dalai Lama, my voice filled with admiration. I am sure she wished that I spoke as excitedly about the Aga Khan, but she never said as much. Instead, she asked me to read stories about His Holiness to her and observed, “All great religious leaders are alike.”

She loved Kevin. Every morning, when Kevin and I were reading in our room, she would bellow for him from across the apartment: “Kevanaut!” He would get out of his chair, pad across the living room, and put his head in Mama’s lap, and she would stroke it and whisper Arabic prayers over him, asking God to keep him safe and on the straight path. When we first arrived, she saw Kevin’s books on Judaism and asked, “You are a Jew?” Kevin nodded. “Masha’Allah,” my grandmother said, meaning “Thanks be to God.” Then she turned to
me and said, "He is Ahl al-Kitab." Muslims use this term, meaning "a person of the book," to refer to their Abrahamic cousins, Jews and Christians.

Earlier in her life, it seemed as though my grandmother could speak to me about nothing but Islam, but now she rarely brought it up at all. Yet, through her interest in Buddhism, her constant Zikr (the Muslim term for remembrance of God through prayer), and her love for Kevin, I was getting a sense of what it meant to be a Muslim.

The most important lesson came in the most unexpected way. I woke up one morning to find a new woman in the apartment. She looked a little scared and disheveled, and she was wearing a torn white nightgown several sizes too big for her, probably one of my grandmother's older outfits. She didn't appear to be a new servant or a family friend.

"Who is she?" I asked my grandmother.

"I don't know her real name. The leader of the prayer house brought her here. She is getting abused at home by her father and uncle. We will take care of her until we can find somewhere safe to send her. We will call her Anissa."

I turned to look at Anissa, who was sitting on the floor with a plate of dal and rice in front of her. She returned my gaze, a little more confident than before. She looked as if she was easing into her new surroundings.

I turned back to my grandmother and said, "Mama, what if these crazy men, this father and uncle, come looking for her? Do you think it's safe to keep this woman here? I mean, Kevin and I are here now, but when we're gone, who will protect you and the servants if they come around?"

My grandmother looked at me a bit suspiciously, as if to say that she had little hope for protection from us. "We will check the door before we answer it. And God is with us," she said.

I couldn't restrain myself. "Mama, this is crazy. You can't just take strange women into your home and keep them here for weeks or months. This isn't the Underground Railroad, you know. You're old now. This is dangerous."

"Crazy, huh?" she responded. "How old are you?"

"Twenty-two."

"I have been doing this for forty-five years. That's more than twice as long as you've been on earth. This may be the fiftieth, sixtieth, hundredth person who has come here and been safe." She got up and walked slowly over to the cabinet and took down a box. "Come here," she told me. She lifted the lid, and I looked inside and saw a mess of Polaroids. "I took pictures of them."

She reached into the box and picked up a picture. "This one was so pretty. Her father was an alcoholic. Her mother died in a car accident. She was afraid that he would sell her into prostitution for money to drink. Some friends told her about me—Ashraf Ma-jii, they would call me—and she saved up some money, a rupee here and there from small sewing jobs, until she had enough for the train from Ahmedabad. It was the middle of the monsoon season. She was dripping wet when she came to the door. Barely seventeen. So scared, so beautiful. She didn't talk for two weeks. But slowly, slowly she came around. We sent her to school to improve her sewing, and we found her a good husband. She lives in Hyderabad now. She has had two children and started a very successful sewing business."

My grandmother started going through the other Polaroids. There was a poor woman with three young sons from the south of India who had heard about my grandmother and come for help. A woman from Calcutta who could neither hear nor speak and whose parents had abandoned her. Several girls whose fathers were sexually and physically abusive. My grandmother helped them find jobs or husbands, sent them back to school, or helped them locate family members in other parts of India. She had made little notes on the back of each Polaroid: name, birthday, current address. The more stories she told about the people she had saved, the more I realized how little I knew about my grandmother.
"Why do you do this?" I finally blurted out.
She looked a little shocked that I would ask, as if to say that the answer was self-evident. But just in case it wasn't clear to me, she said simply, "I am a Muslim. This is what Muslims do."

6
The Story of Islam,
the Story of Pluralism

I can only answer the question "What am I to do?"
if I can answer the prior question "Of what story
or stories do I find myself a part?"
ALASDAIR MACINTYRE

I knew perfectly well that it was dumb luck that I was heading across the ocean on Cecil Rhodes's money in September 1998. My biggest concern was that I was going to be found out. My peculiar charm might have gotten me this far, but I knew it had no hope of working in England, land of stiff lips, dry humor, and endlessly wet days. It would most certainly fail to impress my fellow Rhodes scholars, who I was convinced were all budding Nobel laureates and Harvard faculty.

My first few months at Oxford confirmed all my fears. The other Rhodes scholars all seemed to speak multiple languages and be on a first-name basis with their home state senators. They spoke confidently about their careers—Yale Law School, a U.S. Supreme Court clerkship, a few years making bank in the corporate world and then a turn to politics, which would probably end in being a state governor. If they chose to stick with the law, they had their eyes set on the fed-
er al bench. I was astounded at their absolute conviction that they were meant for global leadership. When a student arrived at the University of Illinois, people talked about how far the Fighting Illini might go in the NCAA tournament that season. Apparently, the messages were different at the fancy private schools where so many Rhodes scholars had been educated. There, it seemed, people were crawling about whispering in undergraduates’ ears that the world was just waiting for them to take over.

Somehow, all my fears coalesced around The New Yorker. It was the magazine I most often saw the other Rhodes scholars reading. I had never even heard of it before I arrived at Oxford. At the University of Illinois, reading the Chicago Tribune made you more knowledgeable about world affairs than just about anybody else. Every week for the first few months I was at Oxford, I went to the newsstand on Little Clarendon Street and bought The New Yorker. Then I walked back through the rain to my coffin-size room and stared at it. That only seemed to heighten my anxiety. I couldn’t even decipher the damn cover; how was I supposed to understand the articles?

I was tempted to tell myself the story that middle-class midwestern kids like me were all about keeping it real and that the Ivy League snobs I had been shipped here with were so full of a sickening sense of entitlement that they weren’t even worth talking to. But I knew that was a lie born of fear and prejudice. Moreover, it undermined the whole reason I had applied for a Rhodes in the first place. If I was going to dismiss my fellow Rhodes scholars so easily, I might as well have stayed home.

Self-righteousness and feelings of inadequacy are close cousins. Once I admitted to myself that winning a Rhodes was a fluke and that everyone around me was smarter and more deserving, I figured the only thing I could do was accept my luck as God’s grace and try to make the most of the experience. I joined a reading group that met at Holywell Manor, a residence for graduate students near the center of Oxford. We read mostly twentieth-century work—Jhumpa Lahiri, Philip Roth, Vikram Seth, Zora Neale Hurston—and talked about the books in relation to the issues around us. I was determined to absorb the erudition of the other Rhodes scholars. Whenever someone mentioned a philosopher I had never heard of, I looked up his or her articles. When a topic was raised that I was unfamiliar with, I went out and bought a stack of books on it. And I finally stopped trying to figure out the cover of The New Yorker and started to read the articles.

Professor Geoffrey Walford was not my idea of an Oxford don. There was no pipe in his mouth, and he did not walk around in black robes. He was rail thin, wore blue jeans every day, insisted on his students calling him Geoffrey, and, unlike many professors, was totally committed to helping me both to complete a quality dissertation and have a good experience in graduate school. I remember my first meeting with him. He had his glasses on and my file open on his desk. “American,” he said, and looked up. I nodded.

“Rhodes scholar,” he continued. I was hoping that would impress him. Something about his arched eyebrows told me that getting impressed wasn’t really his thing.

“I’ve supervised other American Rhodes scholars,” he told me. “The problem with your type is that you tire of libraries and computers quite quickly. You are always off trying to do something, being involved in ‘the world’s fight’ I believe you call it. Whatever you want to do is fine with me really. Let’s just make sure you don’t waste your time here. You should get a doctorate in a topic that will actually hold your interest and ideally connect with your career. That means one thing if you want to be an academic and another thing if you are going in a different direction.”

I couldn’t believe my ears. The biggest horror story I’d heard from friends of mine in doctoral programs was that their professors thought the academic life was the only life worth living. Too often, graduate school is like one long hazing experience intended to turn you into a clone of your academic adviser. Yet here was a professor, a don at Ox-
ford no less, basically encouraging me down a career path of social change and offering to help me get a doctorate on a topic that interested me on the way.

"Well, the thing I've been thinking about most is the relationship between religious identity and interfaith cooperation," I said. Geoffrey listened with interest. His own current research was on the growth of faith-based schools, both Muslim and Christian, in Europe. As a qualitative sociologist, he had spent a significant amount of time as a participant-observer in these schools and interviewed several key players. He suggested identifying an educational space that nurtured both religious identity and encouraged interfaith relations. And, because the Department of Educational Studies at Oxford was working in partnership with several Ismaili institutions, Geoffrey knew about the recent developments in Ismaili religious education. He suggested that I explore those.

The first time I met Azim Nanji, I got the sense that he was a man who would play a key role in my life. A well-regarded professor of Islamic studies who had chaired the Department of Religion at the University of Florida, Azim had recently been appointed by the Ismaili Imam as the director of the Institute of Ismaili Studies in London. I went to see him in the fall of my first year at Oxford and told him that I was interested in doing a doctorate on Ismaili religious education programs. He nodded his approval. Ismaili religious education had gone through a profound change over the past two decades, transforming from a casual affair that essentially imparted the rites and ceremonies of one ethnic group of Ismailis into an intellectually challenging, broad-ranging program that explored the history, aesthetics, and ethics of Islam. Azim and the Institute of Ismaili Studies had been at the center of this transformation.

But Azim knew that I was interested in something more significant than a doctorate. I was embarking on an intensely personal journey. The perspective I brought to Islam had been shaped by my admiration for Dorothy Day, Mahatma Gandhi, and the Dalai Lama, as well as my friendships with Kevin and Brother Wayne. I loved the spirituality and social justice in Christianity, Hinduism, Judaism, and Buddhism. I had had no interest in Islam until my most recent trip to India, when I had found Muslim prayer surfacing in my Buddhist meditation, when the Dalai Lama had told me to be a good Muslim, and when I had seen my grandmother model what that meant. Now I wanted to learn about the tradition behind her spiritual equanimity and service ethic. Were there heroes in my faith like Abraham Joshua Heschel and Martin Luther King Jr.? Did it have poets like Tagore and Blake? Philosophers like Maimonides and Aquinas? Had my faith helped free countries the way that Gandhi's Hinduism had? Did it have mouth-widening beauty, like the Sistine Chapel? I knew nothing of Islam except that it lived in my bones. I desperately wanted it to be magnificent.

Without my explaining any of this directly, Azim somehow understood that this was the animating impulse behind my dissertation topic. He looked at me intently as I explained what I wanted to research, then said, "So many of us begin our careers by studying our history and then locating ourselves within it. My own dissertation was in a similar area. You are living at a time when Islam can go in many different directions, and it will be young people like you who are shaping its next steps. Having an understanding of the humanistic dimensions of Muslim history and how to teach them most effectively is about as important an education as you can get. I want you to know that my door is always open to you."

The early influences on our religious path make all the difference. That truism is shockingly illustrated by the example of Yusuf Islam.

When I was a child, my father and I spent a lot of our time together listening to music. For my tenth birthday, he got me Led Zeppelin II and Stop Making Sense by the Talking Heads. About that time, he started taking me to concerts. I remember singing along to "Gypsy" by the Moody Blues and chanting with the crowd for the Kinks to do an encore. I learned to love live music. Whenever my dad put on a new
to the Bosnian foreign minister, Irfan Ljubijankic, a Muslim and a doctor who had heroically saved the lives of many Bosnians in the basement of his home using the crudest medical instruments.

As a young man, Dr. Ljubijankic had been deeply inspired by Cat Stevens's music, so much so that he had started playing music himself. When they met, Dr. Ljubijankic put in a cassette with a song he had written, "I Have No Cannons That Roar." Yusuf was deeply moved by the song. Dr. Ljubijankic placed the cassette in his hand and said, "Please use it if you can for helping the cause."

Some time later, the doctor's helicopter was shot down over Bihac, and he died. Yusuf played the cassette the doctor had given him over and over. He also started listening to other music coming out of Bosnia—hymns and songs called nashids, which were providing the Bosnians with an enormous amount of inspiration during the war. Listening to these songs, Yusuf had a sudden realization: "Here was a magnificently potent tool; we simply had to use it."

Yusuf, wishing to remain true to his faith and also provide his gift of music to the Bosnians, started studying with other teachers and returned to the traditions of Islam to explore further the permissibility of music. He found that the Prophet allowed and even encouraged music when it served a positive end. He was surprised that the Muslims who had told him that music was against Islam had not pointed out this crucial distinction. One line in his essay "Islam Sings" articulates a central truism in the formation of every individual's religious identity: "It's interesting to note how my formative years as a Muslim were shaped by those I came into contact with."

Yusuf Islam started to make music again.

Azim Nanji's understanding of Islam can be summed up in the famous saying of the Prophet Muhammad: "God is beautiful and loves beauty." I would stop in to see Azim about once a month. He had usually just returned from, or was about to leave for, a trip abroad—lecturing at Aga Khan University in Pakistan, visiting early childhood educational programs in East Africa, attending the ceremony for the
Aga Khan Award for Architecture in Syria, meeting with the Imam in Paris. Even so, our time together always felt relaxed. "How did Islam, a faith with such a highly focused monotheism, find a place in Hindu India, with its millions of Gods?" I asked. And Azim told me a story. Once, there was a Sufi sheik who came with his followers to the state of Gujarat in India. He sent word to the local Hindu prince that he had arrived and wanted to stay. The Hindu prince sent a servant with a full glass of milk to the sheikh, as if to say, "We are already complete here." The sheikh mixed in a spoonful of sugar and sent the sweetened milk back to the prince, as if to say, "My people and I will only contribute positively to this community."

"I love spiritual poetry," I once told Azim. "Blake and Tagore and Whitman. I feel like every nation and religion has a few shining souls who give utterance to the values of their tradition in a way that makes them seem both unique and universal."

"Ah, yes," Azim responded. "I love those poets, too. But my favorite spiritual poet is Rumi, a Muslim born in Afghanistan in the thirteenth century." I almost fell off my chair. Of course I had heard of Rumi. I had seen dozens of his volumes on bookstore shelves. But he was a Muslim? I had no idea. "Some people call Rumi's great opus, The Mathnawi, 'the Qur'an in the Persian tongue'," Azim continued. He told me Rumi's story, how he had been a scholar of Islamic law, making legal rulings and giving stern lectures, until a man in rags approached him one day. "What's this?" the man asked Rumi, pointing to his law books.

"You wouldn't understand," Rumi responded disdainfully.

The man fixed Rumi in a steely gaze, waved his arm, and set the books on fire. Then he waved his arm again, and the books appeared unharmed.

"What was that?" Rumi asked, shocked.

"You wouldn't understand," he said, and disappeared. The man was Shams of Tabriz, and in that moment Rumi made the decision to give up his law books and follow the mystical path of love and spirituality that Shams embodied—the Sufi path.

I almost couldn't restrain myself. I wanted to be reading Rumi right there, right then. Azim smiled and started reciting some of his favorite Rumi lines:

I am not from east or west
not up from the ground
or out of the ocean
my place is placeless
a trace of the traceless
I belong to the beloved

I told Azim about my grandmother in Bombay and how she sheltered women and children in her home. "Oh, yes, Ashraf Ma-jii," Azim said.

"You've heard of her?" I asked, incredulous.

"Of course. She is one of the living saints of the Ismaili tradition. Your family," Azim said, leaning in a little closer, "has lived the service ethic of Islam as well as any that I have known. Your grandmother's father started the Ismaili Volunteer Corps. Your grandfather Major Ebrahim Patel was one of the key pillars of the Ismaili community in India and very close to the Imam. Your aunt in Bombay was the first female president of a major Ismaili national council. Your uncle in Nairobi was the Imam's ambassador to the Kenyan government for many years. Yes, it seems that Islam's service ethic is being passed down the generations in your family. I wonder what you will do with it?"

"Where does this service ethic come from?" I asked.

"From God, at the moment of creation," Azim said. I looked at him a little blankly.

"It is best articulated in Sura 2 of the Holy Qur'an," he told me.

I went home, opened my English translation of the Qur'an, and read. God created Adam, the first human and therefore the representative of all humankind, by blowing His breath into a lump of clay. God made Adam His abd (servant) and khalifa (representative on
earth). It was Adam's responsibility to be a good steward of God's beautiful creation, taking care of the oceans and rivers, the forests and animals. After God deputized Adam, He called the angels forth and told them to offer respect to His vicegerent on earth. But the angels refused and responded, "Will You put there a being who will work mischief on the earth and shed blood, while we sing Your glories and exalt Your utter holiness?" God did not refute the angels directly, instead choosing to say, "I know what you do not know." God then set up a contest between Adam and the angels, asking each to name the different parts of creation. The Angels could not do it, protesting that the only knowledge they possessed was for glorifying God's name. God turned to Adam, who proceeded to accomplish the task.

I finished the story, closed the Qur'an, touched it to my forehead, and kissed it. Outside, the grass in Oxford, greener than anything I had seen before, seemed as if it was shining and pointing to heaven. Two blue-winged birds flew out of one of Oxford's towering trees into the hedges below, cawing loudly. I saw a boy and his mother walking, finished with their afternoon play, going home for dinner. She playfully grabbed the ball from him and began to run away with it. He laughed and followed her. This was creation. God had made it holy, had entrusted humanity to be His representative here. From the title of our ancestor Adam, each human had been given God's breath, a great goodness that not even the angels could perceive but that God knew and spoke of. And what were we able to do that the angels could not, that gave us the ability to serve as stewards of creation? We could name things. We had creativity. We could learn and apply our learning to improve creation. And suddenly I understood my grandmother in India much better. And Dorothy Day and King and Heschel and Gandhi and the Dalai Lama. I felt as if I had a glimpse into their goodness, as if I knew something more of their Source.

The sun was almost finished setting. I remember my mother referring to this as Maghrib time, the holy moment when it is both night and day on earth. Prayer time. I went to my knees, touched my forehead and nose to the floor in sijda, and came back up—the same motion that the angels made when they saw the Prophet Muhammad ascending through the heavens to meet with God. I cupped my hands, closed my eyes, and started reciting Sura al-Fatiha, the first chapter of the Holy Qur'an: "Bismillah Ar Rahman Ar Rahim. Alhamdullilah Ar Rabbil Al Amin." It had been years since I had said it. But somehow, it came back to me, came pouring from my heart onto my lips and out into the world, as if carried on the breath of God.

Under the guidance of Azim Nanji, I learned that Islam is best understood not as a set of rigid rules and a list of required rituals but as a story that began with Adam and continues through us; as a tradition of prophets and poets who raised great civilizations by seeking to give expression to the fundamental ethos of the faith.

I found the clearest articulation of that fundamental ethos in the writing of Fazlur Rahman, a professor at the University of Chicago until his death in 1988. One of the most influential Muslim minds of the twentieth century, Rahman emphasized that the core message of Islam is the establishment of an ethical, egalitarian order on earth. He insisted that all the passages of the Qur'an be read in that general light. The central aspect of this moral order is merciful justice, embodied first and foremost in Allah—the Arabic term for "the God," signaling that there are no others—and then in the prophets that He sends to earth with guidance. God also gives each human an inner light, which the Qur'an refers to as taqwa, the writing of God on our souls. Rahman called taqwa the single most important concept in the Qur'an. It is the piece of us that innately knows the mercy of God. And God, as it says in the Qur'an, sent Muhammad and his followers to be nothing but a special mercy upon all the worlds.

I read biographies of Muhammad. He came of age during a time that Muslims now refer to as jahiliya (a period of darkness), when the lesson of monotheism and mercy that had begun with Adam and had continued through his successors—Noah, Abraham, Moses, and Jesus—had been replaced by a rampant materialism and a worship of false idols. Muhammad became a well-respected merchant in Mecca,
often asked by his fellow Arabs to mediate disputes. Every year, he made a retreat to Mount Hira, where he would pray, fast, and give alms to the poor. During his retreat in the year 610, Muhammad felt a powerful force envelop him and heard this command: "Iqra" (Recite). Though illiterate, Muhammad found the first revelation of the Holy Qur'an pouring from his mouth: "Recite in the name of your Lord who created." Some traditions say that Muhammad was frightened and confused by this incident, thinking that perhaps a demon had possessed him. He ran back to his wife, a well-regarded businesswoman named Khadija, and she assured him that God would not let a demon enter a man as pious and righteous as he. She took Muhammad to see her cousin, Waraq, a Christian. Waraq listened carefully to the story, looked deep into Muhammad's eyes and forehead (where the light of God is said to reveal itself), and declared to Khadija that the prophecy had come true: God's messenger to the Arabs had arrived. Waraq and Khadija, a Christian and a woman, were the first people to recognize Muhammad's prophetic call. For the next twenty-three years, Muhammad guided a growing community of converts in the religion that became called Islam (the term means "submission to the will of God," and its followers became known as Muslims), a faith that Muhammad repeatedly stated was not new but simply a return to God's original message of monotheism and mercy.

I studied the great medieval caliphs of Islam. The Abbasids in Baghdad, who discovered Aristotle and translated his work from Greek to Arabic. The Umayyads in Cordoba, considered the most learned city in Europe at its peak, referred to even by European Christians as "the ornament of the world." The Fatimids in Cairo, an Ismaili empire that built the great Muslim seat of learning, Al Azhar, along with hundreds of libraries and other centers of scholarship. I marveled at the pluralism that Muslim empires had nurtured and protected. The Mughal emperor Akbar was hosting interfaith dialogues in sixteenth-century India while religious wars raged in Europe.

I learned about the role that Muslims had played in modern freedom movements. That Abdul Ghaffar Khan (also known as Badshah Khan), a Pashtun Muslim (coming from the same tribe as Afghanistan's Taliban), played a key part alongside Gandhi in liberating India from British rule, guided by his interpretation of Islam as a nonviolent tradition of liberation. I read Farid Esack's Qur'an, Liberation and Pluralism on the central role of Muslims in the struggle against apartheid in South Africa.

I saw the ethos of Islam brightly expressed in the work of the Aga Khan Development Network (AKDN), the development institutions established by the Aga Khan, the Ismaili Imam. In forgotten parts of the world such as Central Asia and West Africa, the AKDN is providing microloans to villagers to start small businesses and establishing integrated systems of education and health care. The AKDN is building the first university in Central Asia and is expanding Aga Khan University in Karachi, one of the best institutions of higher education in the Muslim world, to include a campus in East Africa. It is investing in projects that protect Islam's vibrant cultural heritage of architecture, calligraphy, and music. The AKDN includes one of the most respected disaster relief organizations in the world, Focus. When a horrible earthquake struck Kashmir in 2005, the Pakistani government relied on AKDN helicopters to get help to the region. Over and over, the Imam has emphasized that the AKDN is a modern expression of the Islamic ethos of dignity, service, and beauty. In other words, the Aga Khan is much more than a philanthropist; he is a Muslim.

I watched myself effortlessly making each leap of faith—that there is one God; that He chose humanity as His vicegerent on earth with the purpose of creating a moral social order; that He sent messengers with guidance for this world; that the final Prophet was a merchant named Muhammad, who received the message we call the Holy Qur'an through the angel Gabriel; that Islam was such a rich tradition that it had given rise to many tariqas (spiritual paths) and madhahbs (schools of thought), one of them being the Ismaili tariqa, which stated that God would provide humanity with a leader who would give guidance in how to interpret the Qur'anic message to meet the
challenges of each new era. I learned the Ismaili Du'a again in full. I went to the Oxford Centre for Islamic Studies and had someone teach me the salat prayer that most Muslims do five times a day. I started to fast during Ramadan.

As I had come to terms with my brown skin, with my Indian heritage, with my American citizenship, I realized that I was now facing and understanding the part of myself that was both first and final: I was a Muslim.

Faith, wrote the great scholar Wilfred Cantwell Smith, is the way a believer connects with a religious tradition. A tradition, wrote the poet T. S. Eliot, is not simply inherited; it is something acquired only by great labor. It was the ethic of service and pluralism in Islam that I felt most enlivened by and most responsible to. Starting the Interfaith Youth Corps gave me the chance to put that ethic into action, to feel worthy of the designation "Muslim."

With the help of several established interfaith organizations, I gathered a group of sixteen young people from four continents and six different religions to discuss the basic principles of the Interfaith Youth Corps in the Bay Area in June 1999. The conference facilitator was Anastasia White, a PhD student in organizational design and a veteran of the reconciliation process in post-apartheid South Africa. She pushed us to view the Interfaith Youth Corps as more a movement than a project. I thought about the movements I had admired during my college years—the Catholic Worker, service learning, multiculturalism. Each one had a core idea that ignited passion across a broad range of people. Dorothy Day didn't start every Catholic Worker House of Hospitality. She developed the idea, built one or two models, and then watched as thousands of others gave new expression to the core concept. I thought about the dozens of service organizations I admired, the hundreds of multicultural initiatives that had helped young people find their identities—more examples of core ideas spreading like wildfire, capturing people's imaginations, relying on the creativity of entrepreneurial individuals to take new shape. I started to think in terms of a movement. The best way to represent that intention was a slight change in name, from Interfaith Youth Corps to Interfaith Youth Core.

Anastasia agreed with that change and added another point: "If the Interfaith Youth Core is going to be a movement, the structure has to be flexible. A movement is a growing group of people making an idea happen in their own way. The trick for the people starting the movement is to articulate the core idea clearly, develop a strategy, and then identify and network the best people doing the work."

We came out of that conference with the three pillars that still serve as the heart of the Interfaith Youth Core: intercultural encounter, social action, and interfaith reflection. In other words, the Interfaith Youth Core was about bringing young people from different backgrounds together to engage in social action and reflect on how their different traditions inspired that work. "Now we have to test the concept," Anastasia told me at the close of the conference. "You will learn a lot more about the idea of the Interfaith Youth Core by running projects in the real world than by arguing over language at a conference. And I know the perfect place to start: South Africa."

The Parliament of the World's Religions was being held in Cape Town in December 1999. It was the world's largest interfaith event, with thousands of theologians, activists, and believers of different faiths coming together. The previous Parliament, held in Chicago in 1993, had had a small youth component, but the Parliament organizers were hoping for a higher-impact youth program this time around. They were planning to have more than five hundred young people from around the world attend. The Interfaith Youth Core offered to help them design and run the youth program.

I arrived in Cape Town in late October 1999, nervous and excited. This was my first experience at organizing something outside the United States. I found a nation bursting with energy. It had been less than a decade since the fall of apartheid and barely five years since the African National Congress (ANC), the first black majority government, had taken power. The nation was creating itself anew.
Apartheid in South Africa was a violation of the spiritual principle of human togetherness. South Africans had a term for this principle, ubuntu, which translates roughly as “people are people through other people.” It was because of ubuntu that South Africans had voted for the pluralist politics of Nelson Mandela’s ANC instead of the separatist “throw the whites into the sea” politics of the more radical parties. It was because of ubuntu that Archbishop Desmond Tutu had agreed to lead the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, which sought healing, not punishment, for the sins of apartheid. It was because of ubuntu that Mandela invited his jailers from Robben Island to stand next to him when he was inaugurated as president.

Ubuntu applied not only to racial and tribal harmony but also to religious pluralism. South Africa had significant Hindu, Muslim, Christian, and African Traditionalist populations, as well as a small Jewish population. Religion had a mixed history in South Africa. Apartheid was, after all, not simply a political program but also a theology. Its architects had PhDs from seminaries in Europe and had constructed apartheid from a warped reading of the Bible. But instead of rejecting religion because of its association with apartheid, South Africans had found a way of reinterpreting it as a holy path of liberation and equality. As Desmond Tutu famously said, when the white people came to South Africa, the black people had the land, and they had the Bible. The white people told us to close our eyes and pray. When we opened our eyes, we had the Bible and they had the land. And now we are going to take this book seriously.

South African leaders viewed the Parliament as a spark to increase the participation of the country’s diverse religious communities in the nation’s renewal. Imam Rashied Omar called it “an African opportunity.”

I slept three hours a night during the month leading up to the Parliament, and not even that the week of the event. Registrations were coming in from young people in Japan, Brazil, India, Kenya, Iran—we could barely keep up. These young people had all kinds of suggestions for the youth program. Some wanted to do a project in the poor communities of Cape Town, called the townships. Others had heard that the Parliament was being held in District Six, where years ago the apartheid government had forcefully removed an entire neighborhood of people of color and claimed the land for white people. They wanted to do some kind of a service project and ceremony on that land commemorating its history.

The common theme of the messages we received was that the young people wanted to do something, not just sit back and receive. They wanted to engage South Africa directly, establish real relationships, leave the country a little better for their having been there. We organized a trip to a community center in Mannenberg, a township in the poor Cape Flats area, so that young community organizers coming to the Parliament could connect with their peers in South Africa. We put together a cleanup of the vacant lots in District Six, then asked young people from different faiths to speak about the importance of stewarding creation from their religious traditions. Kevin, who had come from Chicago as part of the Interfaith Youth Core team, met a group of South African hip-hop artists and engaged them in drafting a piece for the youth plenary presentation. “Our generation has to tell the story of interdependence,” he said to me. A group of twenty-five young people were invited to make a presentation to the Assembly of Religious and Spiritual Leaders who had gathered at the Parliament and included the Dalai Lama. Instead of standing up at the microphone and voicing platitudes about peace, we encircled the room and made commitments of concrete action: working for the rights of the poor in Britain, building a network of young religious leaders in India, moving forward with a program that destroyed guns in Brazil.

The Interfaith Youth Core approach caught the attention of several people at the Parliament. A senior member of Sarvodaya Shramadana, a Sri Lankan–based movement meaning “the awakening of all through the sharing of labor,” invited me to make a presentation at one of its interfaith youth camps. I had admired Sarvodaya Shramadana and its Buddhist leader, A. T. Ariyaratne, for many years. The Interfaith Youth Core was partially based on its methodology of bring-
ing people from different backgrounds together in a community development project, then encouraging them to use that initial space of gathering to form more sustainable networks that could engage with the root problems they were collectively facing. In this way, a project to clean up a river could lead to a group of farmers creating a regional organization that bargained for lower seed prices from suppliers. The Sarvodaya Shramadana member wanted his youth camp to know that young people all over the world were coming together to do service projects, talk across religious traditions, and build organizations.

A representative from Habitat for Humanity in India invited the Interfaith Youth Core to partner with it in a project the group was doing in Hyderabad. Historically a Christian organization based in the American South, Habitat was now a truly international entity and was thinking more seriously about how to deal with the diverse religious communities it was encountering in places such as South Asia and the Middle East. Rima, the Habitat representative, wanted the Interfaith Youth Core to run interfaith reflection sessions with a group of religiously diverse young people who would be building homes in the slums of Hyderabad in January 2001.

Anastasia had been right. When the Interfaith Youth Core presented itself as a mobile idea that could be applied in many places, other people jumped at the opportunity to have us involved in their work. Forgetting about my doctorate for a moment, I put both trips on my calendar and thanked my lucky stars for the opportunity to travel the world and do interfaith service projects.

Anastasia invited me to spend New Year’s with her family at the Wilgespruit Fellowship Centre, a Christian community and retreat center located outside Johannesburg. Like the Catholic Worker, Wilgespruit tried to provide a model for the “Kingdom on Earth,” a place where people could be better. Anastasia’s father, Dale White, was an Anglican priest who believed, in the spirit of Christianity and South Africa, that humanity was meant to be diverse and in relationship. During the height of the apartheid era, Dale (who is white) met with Steven Biko to nurture the black consciousness movement, because he felt it was crucial to rebuild the historical memory and pride of black South Africans. As apartheid was ending and violence between South Africa’s various tribes began brewing, Wilgespruit started to train peace mediators. Now, as South Africa was moving into the twenty-first century, Dale was intent on Wilgespruit becoming an interfaith community. To him, South African renewal was not simply about government housing and equal employment laws. It was a spiritual goal that required the unique wisdom of diverse religious communities working together.

It was Ramadan, and I started to settle into fasting. Anastasia fasted with me. We made it a spiritual retreat, sleeping in the small chapel at Wilgespruit, waking up at dawn to say our respective prayers, and then joining with Dale to pray together. “God bless Africa, its children, and its leaders,” Dale would say, his voice still slightly weak from the stroke he had suffered recently. “God bless humanity, its various races and religions.” I could not help but think that in this country ten years earlier, it would have been illegal for me to stand in the same room as these people because of the color of my skin. And had it not been for the people in this room, and for so many other people in so many rooms like this, it might still be illegal for us to stand here together.

I observed Laylatul Qadr, the night in Ramadan when the Qur’an was first revealed, on New Year’s Eve, the turn of the millennium. That night, in prayer, I had a moment of stark clarity: I was part of the story of Islam. I was part of the story of pluralism. I was part of the story of ubuntu.

Every time I announced to my thesis adviser, Geoffrey, that I was leaving for a month or two to run an interfaith youth project somewhere in the world, he would mutter that being a doctoral student was meant to be a full-time occupation and then tell me to have a safe trip and return ready to write. He understood that much of my mental energy was going toward building the Interfaith Youth Core. He also understood that I felt like a stranger in Oxford.
Oxford, someone once told me, is a city of ten thousand students, all studying alone in their rooms. One day you wake up and realize you are among them. The university is organized around its residential colleges, self-contained little worlds dominated by the adventures, idiosyncrasies, and hormones of British undergraduates. Between November and March, the parks close in the late afternoon, and the sun seems permanently hidden behind a thick sheet of immobile clouds. Most of the people I knew preferred the shelter of their rooms to the constant drizzle of Oxford. But I went crazy if I was cooped up for more than a couple of hours a day. That meant, mostly, I flew solo. After a morning of reading and writing at home, I would make my way to Ricardo's sandwich store in the covered market, then hole up at the Grand Café on High Street, drinking French press coffee and catching up on American politics in the International Herald Tribune. Evenings, I would go to a play at the Oxford Playhouse or one of the smaller theaters in town, or to an art film at the Phoenix cinema. Occasionally, I would meet with a group of Rhodes scholars for dinner at the Wig and Pen pub or a late-night ice cream at G & D's, but it was not uncommon for me to go days without talking to a friend. It was a stark change from living at Stone Soup, where I was surrounded by eighteen other hippie activists and artists, each constantly insisting that I had to read his new poem or hear her new folk song.

And then I met Nivita. She was Indian, had grown up in Botswana, had attended Amherst College, and had won a Rhodes scholarship from the Southern Africa region. At Oxford, she was studying development with a focus on reducing the devastation of AIDS in Africa. She was quiet and dark and beautiful. She made me feel immediately shy.

After a day of research in London, I would walk back from the Gloucester Green bus station and take the long way past Nivita's dorm room at St. Antony's College. If the light was on, I would call her name until she came to the window, and we would talk for a few minutes before I continued on home, the night suddenly feeling warmer. Once, when I returned especially late and the light was out,
swayed back and forth, eyes closed, totally absorbed in their beauty. I stopped treating the ghazals of the Pakistani Sufi singer Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan as background music. Now I listened to them with full concentration, with my prayer beads in hand, hearing the music for what it really was: worship.

Nivita and I would take turns praying before dinner. "Your turn," I would say, and we would bow our heads and close our eyes, and I could hear the soothing chanting of Sanskrit lift into the air. We would open our eyes, squeeze hands, and begin eating.

And when it was my turn to pray, I would say Sura al-Fatiha. Once, after I said "Amin" and opened my eyes, I noticed that Nivita's were still closed and that she was whispering something. I realized it was Sanskrit.

At first I wanted to say, "Hey, what's the deal? My prayer doesn't count for you?" But I bit my tongue. Nivita didn't mean to offend me. She was not suggesting that Muslim prayer fell short of heaven. She was not making an objective claim about the worth of one religion over another. She was only indicating that her preference was to connect to God in her holy language.

I remembered my time at the Catholic Worker, how I had felt uplifted by the prayer life but also slightly apart from it. I thought about "Ya Ali, Ya Muhammad" coming into my Buddhist meditation and how praying in Arabic felt like the completion of a long journey home.

I realized that I loved Sanskrit prayer, that I considered it beautiful, even holy. But it wasn't my holy language, not my way of connecting with God. And I understood somewhere in my soul that, ultimately, I needed to be with someone who shared the same language of prayer.

The discussions in our book group turned toward life after Oxford. Half of the people were going to law school, most at Yale, some at Georgetown or the University of Virginia. Others had taken jobs as consultants and investment bankers. The word "career" was frequently invoked. Everybody seemed to have a plan. I had a mostly complete doctorate and a string of experience running interfaith youth projects in India, Sri Lanka, and South Africa. "Well, it was fun while it lasted," I said to myself.

I went to see Azim Nanji at the Institute of Ismaili Studies. I was wondering if he had any suggestions for tenure-track jobs I should apply for and whether he would be willing to write me a letter of reference. It was Azim's job to develop young Ismaili scholars. The only time I had ever detected pride in his voice was when he told me about Ismailis who had gotten jobs at major universities in North America and Europe, and he mused about the impact they would have when their work started to be published. I thought perhaps he would be excited about my new career focus. But he knew me too well.

"What about the Interfaith Youth Core?" he asked.

"I don't know if starting an interfaith youth movement is a career," I told him. "I've put all this work into doing this doctorate, and I think maybe I should just do what people who get doctorates do—get a job at a university."

"Listen," Azim said, "there are a lot of people in the world with good careers. But you have a big idea about one of the most important issues of our time. You've spent the past three years building that idea. That's more than a career. That's a calling. And when you have a calling, you have to follow it."