



## Hearing Vocation Differently: Meaning, Purpose, and Identity in the Multi-Faith Academy

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## The Change a Difference Makes

Formation of Self in the Encounter with Diversity

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### Abstract and Keywords

This chapter offers a detailed description of the many ways that college students encounter difference, demonstrating how this tends to shape their understanding of their future directions in life. The author emphasizes the communal and reciprocal aspects of reflection and discernment on our callings, drawing especially on Jewish traditions in sacred texts and in modern thought. The chapter includes a description of the author's own encounter with difference, which made for a significant change in her own vocational journey. This chapter introduces the term *lifestance*, which is used here (and by a number of contributors of other chapters in the same volume) to account for a wide range of perspectives, without necessarily assuming that these will always be connected with "religion."

*Keywords:* vocation, calling, lifestance, Judaism, difference, undergraduate education, Jewish philosophy, Hebrew Bible, coformation, interfaith encounter

For many undergraduate students, time spent in college or university is their first or most intense encounter with difference. They may meet people of diverse races, classes, religions or lifestances,<sup>1</sup> sexual orientations, and gender identities (beyond the binaries to which many are accustomed); they are also likely to encounter a host of new ideas, as well as critical tools for thinking about them. The experience can be extremely challenging. "Research has shown that social diversity in a group can cause discomfort, rougher interactions, a lack of trust, greater perceived interpersonal conflict, lower communication, less

cohesion, more concern about disrespect, and other problems. So what is the upside?"<sup>2</sup> Indeed, given this list of potential complications, why do colleges and universities often actively encourage such encounters?

**(p.24)** Decades of research demonstrate how diversity makes us more innovative, diligent, and successful.<sup>3</sup> In the context of higher education, diversity's most emphasized value may be how it prepares students to thrive in and contribute to the flourishing of a multicultural world.<sup>4</sup> When General Motors filed an *amicus* brief on behalf of the University of Michigan to defend the school's affirmative action admission policies, for example, it argued that

diversity in academic institutions is essential to teaching students the human relations and analytic skills they need to succeed and lead in the work environments of the twenty-first century. These skills include the abilities to work well with colleagues and subordinates from diverse backgrounds; to view issues from multiple perspectives; and to anticipate and respond with sensitivity to the cultural differences of highly diverse customers, colleagues, employees, and global business partners.<sup>5</sup>

Essential well beyond the world of business, constructive relationships across difference are considered fundamental to the functioning of democracy: "Community and democratic citizenship are strengthened when undergraduates understand and experience social connections with those outside of their often parochial 'autobiographies,' and when they experience the way their lives are necessarily shaped by others."<sup>6</sup>

**(p.25)** In this chapter, I argue that engagement with difference is also a vital catalyst for addressing questions of meaning, direction, and purpose—what might be described, in classical Christian language, as *vocation*. I do not come to this reflection as a Christian, however, but as a Jew—and I present not a Jewish theory of vocation, but the experience of one Reform Ashkenazi/Sephardi Jewish woman making her way in the world. This experience is drawn into full expression through a particular spiritual tradition and encounters with diversity.

The concept of vocation employed here is not a discovery of what to "do" with one's life, but rather intimations of how to live it out most fully in *lo cotidiano*—the stuff of our daily reality. This term, borrowed from *mujerista* thought, constructs theory around the many quotidian details of our lives.<sup>7</sup> In the rabbinic imagination, we are each imbued with *yetzer tov* and *yetzer hara* (asymmetrically framed as "a good inclination" and "the evil inclination"); we choose between them in every moment in order to walk the path of a meaningful life. Whatever I, as a Jew, might make of the historically Christian investigation of vocation, it is never once and for all; the journey of becoming is ongoing and involves all aspects of my being.

Recent scholarship on vocation has similarly broadened the discernment process to explore what kind of person one aspires to be, with a recognition that this “calling” is shaped by countless small decisions made every day over the course of a lifetime.<sup>8</sup> It has also come to acknowledge the importance of the dialogical, to explore how we discover our path through relationship.<sup>9</sup> I hope to extend this discourse by emphasizing that *encounters with difference* are essential to the dialogue. The key inquiry becomes: How should I live my life, and how does my engagement with diversity help me to answer that question?

Exploring various dimensions of this thesis, I begin with a brief reflection on the way “difference” operates in human psychology and society; paradoxically, it appears to be a catalyst both for conflict and for personal growth. The chapter then investigates Jewish text and tradition to unpack these complex dynamics, ultimately asserting a mutually formative process that is key to answering **(p. 26)** the question. Drawing on theoretical and experiential learning, I connect these insights back to the context of higher education, and conclude with a personal reflection on interreligious teaching that hopefully illuminates this perspective on vocation.

### The nature of difference

As noted earlier, diversity is not easy for humans to navigate. Difference should not be viewed as evidence of inequality; nevertheless, we frequently judge distinctions among human beings in negative ways. Research in social identity theory has demonstrated that group membership, even if arbitrarily assigned, is sufficient to catalyze favoritism among members of the group and discrimination against those outside.<sup>10</sup> Society generally fabricates its Others, “selecting, isolating and emphasizing an aspect of another people’s life and making it stand for their difference.”<sup>11</sup> Moreover, the construction of these identities is bound up with power.<sup>12</sup> Those who have the power to define set those who are different as the Other—their (somehow less worthy) counterpart. “Thus abnormality is the other of the norm, deviation the other of law-abiding, illness the other of health, barbarity the other of civilization, animal the other of the human, woman the other of man.”<sup>13</sup> The latter element in each pair defines the former, but also depends on it for its self-assertion.

Power dynamics aside, the idea that self and other are mutually constituted is not inherently problematic; in fact, it can bring us back to my thesis regarding vocation: to figure out who I am, I must encounter and understand who I am not. If “a ‘theory of the other’ is but another way of establishing a ‘theory of the self,’”<sup>14</sup> then a more robust engagement with diversity necessarily requires a deeper dive into discernment. Indeed, a substantive encounter with difference is likely a prerequisite for finding one’s true vocation.

**(p.27)** The vocational value of encountering difference can be underscored by psychosocial studies such as those of Jean Piaget, who demonstrated that a

person's intellectual and moral development depends on the capacity to understand ideas and feelings of others ("perspective taking").<sup>15</sup> Similarly, Rose Coser established that experiences of diversity (which she calls "complex social structures") lead to a stronger sense of individuality and a deeper understanding of one's place in the world.<sup>16</sup> These disciplinary insights resonate powerfully with student development goals in higher education.

In analyzing the way religious communities set themselves apart, Jonathan Z. Smith observes that "meaning is made possible by difference. . . . Relations are discovered and reconstituted through projects of differentiation."<sup>17</sup> He follows a train of thought in anthropology, invoking Claude Lévi-Strauss to establish the confrontation of difference as the essence of thought. More simply, consider how Sesame Street uses the sorting song, "One of these things is not like the others . . ." to teach basic cognitive skills. Difference is how we learn.

It is within scripture and tradition that I discover the richest insights into the complex role that difference plays in the human psyche and society. For example, the fact that our minds are hard-wired to identify difference is poetically illuminated by the biblical creation narrative that envisions God fashioning the universe through distinction of night from day, seas from land, waters above and waters below (Gen. 1). We understand the nature of something—it "comes to be" in our minds—by separating it from what it is not.

### Encounter with difference in Jewish text and tradition

Within modern Jewish thought, a number of authors bring to light the positive, even redemptive dimensions of difference; they also affirm the coformative nature of encounter. Many readers are familiar with the basic premise of Martin Buber's *I and Thou*, appreciating his insistence that we can engage with others—not only human beings, but all of creation—in ways that transcend utilitarian (p. 28) experience and objectification (what he calls an "I-It" relationship). We must seek out the fullness of one another's being, each one the subject rather than an object of the other in our meeting ("I-Thou"). Less well known is Buber's assertion that we become our complete, actualized selves *only through* such I-Thou relationships: "[A person] becomes an I through a You. What confronts us comes and vanishes, relational events take shape and scatter, and through these changes crystallizes, more and more each time, the consciousness of the constant partner, the I-consciousness." To Buber, "all actual life is encounter."<sup>18</sup>

In Joseph Soloveitchik's reading of the second creation narrative in Genesis, he discerns that we are existentially hungry for this kind of meeting. "It is not good for *adam* to be alone" (Gen 2:18; the Hebrew word refers simply to a human being, not a male named Adam). In order to fully realize the quest for redemption, says Soloveitchik, this being "must initiate action leading to the discovery of a companion."<sup>19</sup> To become fully human requires relationship and even sacrifice, as the second person is fashioned from the side of the first.

College students often experience this struggle to discover companions in profound ways, having left home and family to recreate themselves anew.

Emmanuel Levinas sets such encounter as the foundation of ethics, and establishes difference as its key. He maintains that the claim of the Other upon us has priority, in importance and chronologically, to our own being; it is how we *come into* being. Playing with the Hebrew construct *hineni*, meaning “here I am,” he points out that the “I” is found in the suffix. To Levinas, this suggests that “I” do not really exist until I present myself in response to your claim upon me. My responsibility is triggered by the mere existence of the other person, he insists, challenging the tendency to found our social contract on reciprocity and the premise of sameness. While human beings often have much in common, Levinas cautions that the world as we know it will always identify someone as outside that circle of concern. Further, if I merely absorb the otherness of a person into some similarity to self, some embodiment of society or a larger sense of “the human,” I have erased that person’s essential particularity. Ultimately, God is revealed in otherness rather than sameness; the Holy Other is realized in meeting the face of difference.<sup>20</sup>

**(p.29)** What gives rise to this emphasis in modern Jewish thought? One response might be theological: Judaism’s covenantal tradition binds me in sacred relationship to God, to Torah, to the people of Israel, and to all creation. These relationships are rooted in a life of *mitzvah* (pl. *mitzvot*). *Mitzvah* is appropriately translated as “commandment,” yet the Hasidic masters taught something profound when they reimagined its etymology; they connected it to an Aramaic term with the same root that means attachment, companionship, joining together.<sup>21</sup> *Mitzvot* are the actions that form the glue of our relationships—constructing and shaping both self and other.

In a captivating little book that deliberately mistranslates Hebrew words in order to get at something deeper, Lawrence Kushner tells us that *mitzvah* means “response.”<sup>22</sup> By responding to the claims made on me—whether I identify their source as a Divine commander, family tradition, Jewish peoplehood, or a universal social contract—I deepen my relationship with the “one” who calls. I also deepen understanding of my place in the world. As with Buber and Levinas, living in response-ability is the key action of self-realization.<sup>23</sup>

The rabbis paint a mental image: every person carries a single letter of Torah, and each is an essential part of the Divine plan for creation. The possibilities generated in meeting one another offer a potentially unlimited range of outcomes; certain formations and connections among these letters start to “make sense.” Because our individual letters bear little significance on their own, we need others to fashion meaning. We become the collective fulfillment of our destinies.<sup>24</sup>

In addition to such theological foundations, history surely plays a role in the formation of Jewish thought. The co-constitutive quality of self and other was **(p. 30)** evident as Jews became the consummate “Other” in Western culture; Christianity took shape over against its constructed image of Judaism.<sup>25</sup> Continuing hostility and pressure on Jews to assimilate into dominant cultures yielded a complicated range of attitudes toward non-Jews, but it also highlighted the existential value of diversity in human history. Jonathan Sacks speaks of the “dignity of difference,” and identifies Judaism as a tradition of resistance to the imposition of a single truth on a plural world. He rightly traces this commitment back to the Hebrew Bible and its critique of empire. In particular, he reads the story of the Tower of Babel (Gen. 11:1–9) as a rejection of the imperial monoculture of the builders. Western culture tends to privilege universal truths, and we have been accustomed to reading Babel’s story of confused languages and dispersed peoples as a punishment rather than a correction, or as an etiology of cultural diffusion and conflict. The building of the imperial tower, however—with its unitary worldview and objective—runs counter to the natural (even desired) proliferation of languages, cultures, and peoples described in the preceding chapter of Genesis.<sup>26</sup>

At the same time, the fundamental common ground of humanity is established at our creation—each one in the “image of God” (Gen 1:26)—and this remains the anchor of our solidarity. Similarity and difference are not opposites; they are necessary corollaries. In fact, the Hebrew Bible presents a complex understanding of humans’ multifarious relationship with difference. My interpretations of the text are neither comprehensive nor inevitable, but I till this inexhaustibly rich soil of Torah to cultivate its multitude of possible meanings.

### Biblical sources

Given that the Hebrew Bible was redacted in Babylonia after the destruction of the Temple and forced dispersion of the people in 586 BCE, it should not surprise us that this text sometimes displays the fear of difference that frequently plagues us. The exiles’ deep anxiety that Israelite identity might be swallowed up by the dominant culture gives polemical force to the imprecations against the Canaanites in Deuteronomy 7, and to other passages that depict them in disturbingly negative fashion. We continually divide the world into “us and them”; **(p.31)** even though prophetic voices warn against the chauvinism and parochialism that often result, the text sometimes slips into these easy tropes.<sup>27</sup>

Such vulnerabilities are evident in our own context as well. American exceptionalism fosters a sense of superiority, and a latent nationalism threatens to transform “we’re number one” rhetoric into “we’re the only ones who matter” policies. Some people imagine that outsiders are dangerous: they commit crimes, they take our jobs, they corrupt our culture. Some individuals claim that

the nation needs to be taken back from people whom they perceive to be “other.” We sometimes see difference as danger.

Yet the Hebrew Bible also problematizes these human tendencies. The character of Jonah cannot muster an iota of compassion for the people and animals of Nineveh, capital of the Assyrian empire. Essentialized and stripped of individual identity, they represent only the enormous harm inflicted by the empire on his nation. Although we are surely meant to understand his terror when he intuits that God sends him to warn the enemy so they may repent and be forgiven, the text clearly criticizes him for this human failing. The final chapter of the book portrays God orchestrating events so that Jonah sees how his own welfare is bound up with a plant that gave him shade. “You cared about the plant, which you did not work for and which you did not grow, which appeared overnight and perished overnight. Should not I care about Nineveh, that great city, in which there are more than 120,000 people who do not yet know their right hand from their left, and numerous animals?” (Jonah 4:10-11). They are no longer faceless; the “other” is rehumanized.

The Hebrew Bible insists that we recognize the perils of our tendency toward “othering.” In the Book of Esther, Haman convinces King Ahasuerus to order the annihilation of the Jews with this simple argument: “There is a certain people, scattered and dispersed among the other peoples in all the provinces of your realm; their laws are different from those of other people and they do not obey the king’s laws. It is not in the king’s interest to tolerate them” (Esther 3:8).<sup>28</sup> In Exodus 1, the Israelites are enslaved as Egyptian leadership easily persuades the population that their neighbors suddenly pose a threat; there are too many **(p.32)** of these foreigners and they might become a fifth column. As readers, we identify with the Israelites’ suffering and their dread; we ache for the humanity that is stolen from them. As citizens of the modern world, we shudder as we recognize continuing marginalization of those seen to be “not like us.” Immigrants, Muslims, the formerly incarcerated—it is so easy to demonize their differences as justification for stripping people of their freedoms. Students acquire tools for *analyzing* systems of power, privilege, and oppression, but it is much harder to dismantle them.

The Hebrew Bible’s most repeated instruction involves the stranger: “You shall not oppress a stranger, for you know the heart of the stranger, having yourselves been strangers in the land of Egypt” (Exod. 23:9), “Love the stranger as yourself” (Lev. 19:34)—and similarly over thirty times throughout the sacred text. I am powerfully struck by the idea of empathy as a commandment. Jonathan Sacks writes,

To be a Jew is to be a stranger. It is hard to avoid the conclusion that this is why Abraham is commanded to leave land, home and father’s house; why, long before Joseph was born, Abraham was already told that his

descendants would be “strangers in a land not their own”; why Moses had to suffer personal exile before assuming leadership of the people; why the Israelites underwent persecution before inheriting their own land; and why the Torah is so insistent that this experience—the retelling of the story on Pesach, along with the never-forgotten taste of the bread of affliction and the bitter herbs of slavery—should become a permanent part of their collective memory.<sup>29</sup>

By itself, however, empathy is not sufficient: Torah is explicit and emphatic about protecting those on the margins (e.g., Exod. 22:20–26, Deut. 24:17–22) with concrete deeds to support and sustain them. There are gleaning privileges (Lev. 19), forgiveness of debts in the sabbatical year (Deut. 15), and redistribution of wealth in the jubilee (Lev. 25). With action and reflection, these experiences—continually retold and rehearsed—shape us. The command that we love the stranger as ourselves whispers that our self-discovery and self-fulfillment are bound up in relationship with those who are different.

In the emergence of Wisdom literature, the Hebrew Bible also records an inevitable shift toward a multicultural world, as the older tribal culture of ancient **(p.33)** Israel adjusted to a bigger, more complicated universe. Encounters with difference led to profound interrogation of accepted truths, as illustrated in the Books of Job and Ecclesiastes. In another text of this genre, the Book of Proverbs, Wisdom travels everywhere just to make our acquaintance:

It is Wisdom calling,  
Understanding raising her voice.  
She takes her stand at the topmost heights,  
By the wayside, at the crossroads,  
Near the gates at the city entrance;  
At the entryways, she shouts,  
“O men, I call to you;  
My cry is to all humanity.” (Prov. 8:1–4)

Wisdom is presented in female form, rather forward in making herself available to anyone who might come by. Her promiscuity is not disparaged; it is essential to cultivate the courage to embrace new ideas—ideas the Israelites encountered through cultural difference. Timeless strumpet that she is, Wisdom-woman is still out hustling on the streets. In our pluralistic context, in our global society—*our* bigger, more complicated world—her fullness is discovered only in the teeming masses of “all humanity” as we meet at the crossroads. Self-realization is achieved at the gateway of the strange, wide world.

The biblical characters of Esther, Daniel, and Ruth all find their direction in confronting otherness. Although each story is unique, Esther and Daniel both discover their power and purpose by standing up for their own distinctive identities despite tremendous personal risk. Likely a message from the redactors

to the diaspora Jews of their own age, the narratives show how individuals might be liberated by embracing their differences.<sup>30</sup>

In the Book of Ruth, the recently widowed title character leaves the familiarity of Moab, where she belongs. Her relationship with her Israelite mother-in-law, Naomi, has provided a new sense of identity: “Your people shall be my people, and your God my God” (Ruth 1:16). Accompanying Naomi on her return to Bethlehem, in a land where Ruth is a stranger, she also finds her “vocation.” She is supported by Israelite society’s laws protecting the poor and the stranger; ultimately, she helps to redeem the family’s land, heal Naomi from her consuming **(p.34)** emptiness, and build a future for herself and her adopted people. Revealed at the end to be the great-grandmother of King David, Ruth’s bold actions to find her path are presented also as the catalyst that establishes the anointed royal house of Israel.

Jacob similarly distills his core identity through his own meeting with difference, as he emerges limping but renamed in the dawn after wrestling with a divine being. He is now called *Yisrael* (Israel), God-wrestler, in the wake of his transformative encounter with the angelic Other (Gen. 32). In fact, it is possible to see the entire People of Israel as formed through their experience in the crucible of Egypt (delineated in Hebrew as *mitzrayim*, “narrow straits”); they go down as seventy souls merely seeking to survive, but emerge as a great nation with covenantal purpose (Deut. 10:22, 26:5).

Perhaps the most radical insight of the Hebrew Bible is the mutual self-actualization of God and humanity in relationship with each other. There could be no more absolute Other than God; nevertheless, in the unfolding of creation and covenant, both God and people evolve—luring each other to respond and to become. “You shall be My people, and I shall be your God” (Exod. 6:7; similarly, Lev. 26:12, Jer. 30:22). Process theologians of diverse faiths have explored this dynamic of simultaneous, mutual formation, described earlier as “coformation.” Among them, Catherine Keller notes how it holds true in the interpersonal realm as well:

It is precisely the dynamism of our interdependence, by which we constantly influence each other—flow into each other—that keeps us in process. “We influence each other by entering into each other.” If the world is an open-ended process of interactions, it is because we may exercise choice in the way we influence each other’s becomings and the way we shape our own becoming out of the manifold of influences.<sup>31</sup>

Keller highlights the importance of a “robust relationalism” to effect the blessings of pluralism.

**(p.35)** As we turn to explore the nature of coformation in higher education,<sup>32</sup> we should not lose sight of the Hebrew Bible's special interest in the encounter with substantive difference—among individuals, between peoples, and with the most Holy Other. Its manifold insights into the pitfalls and possibilities help us to see how navigating these rocky shoals is a fundamental journey of human existence.

#### Coformation in higher education

The idea of coformation grows from consciousness of our intersubjectivity. Replacing the myth of the fully autonomous self, we recognize how shared meaning-making is essential in shaping our ideas and relations. It reflects the teaching philosophy of Paulo Freire: "The thinking Subject cannot think alone. In the act of thinking about the object s/he cannot think without the co-participation of another Subject. . . . *It is the 'we think' which establishes the 'I think' and not the contrary.*"<sup>33</sup> Through encounters with diversity, students are challenged to become more conscious of their own particularity and more adept at narrating their journey within it, with perspective to view their identities from outside as well as from within.

To examine how engagement with difference enhances students' sense of meaning and purpose, it can be helpful to focus on a particular type of difference, even though we meet each other in the multitude of our attachments. Here, I continue to use a religious lens, sharing a few examples that make use of theoretical analysis and anecdotal evidence; still, many of the insights apply to other types of difference as well.

#### **(p.36)** Student life in theory

Scholars have long identified the illumination that can shine through encounter with diverse religious traditions. Comparative theologian Francis Clooney, for instance, finds that his study of Hinduism deepens his Catholic commitments. He embraces the invitation to be transformed by the life and literature of other faiths—appreciating how the Hindu divine name of *Narayana* enriches his own articulation of God's manifest qualities, and how Hindu goddess worship helps him understand what it means to engender God as male *or* female, causing the hymns to Mary in his own tradition to resound in new ways.<sup>34</sup>

Of course, people and traditions should not be reduced to what they can teach us about ourselves. Moreover, coformative self-discovery cannot be accomplished only through engagement with ideas. Substantive transformation happens in relationship, with actual people and their messy, not-exactly-textbook, lived religion.

Students often arrive on campus with a minimal understanding of their own religious heritage. Christian Smith and Melinda Lundquist Denton describe teenagers' most common spiritual perspective as "moralistic therapeutic deism"—a sense that God creates and orders the world, and that God wants

them to be good and to be happy, but is not particularly involved in their lives (except when they need God to solve a problem).<sup>35</sup> James Fowler delineates six stages of faith development, noting that many young adults move from a synthetic-conventional perspective (Stage 3) to an individuative-reflective one (Stage 4) during their college years (ages 18–22). In this growth, they develop a capacity to question their assumptions, interrogate dissonance, and shift from dependency on authority to interdependent engagement with a variety of other people—ultimately taking greater ownership of their journey.<sup>36</sup> Critically oriented coursework can challenge an immature spiritual formation, as does the general process of maturation. Yet this process is powerfully advanced through relationships with people of diverse lifestance perspectives, prodding students to question matters they had never stopped to consider, to learn more about their **(p.37)** own traditions (and possibly about others'), and to develop a more sophisticated sense of their purpose and place.<sup>37</sup>

### Student life in practice

These processes do not unfold automatically in contexts of diversity. As noted previously, people have complex responses to encountering difference. To reap the benefits of constructive coformation, we must carefully till the soil, plant seeds of transformative conversation, and tend the shoots that grow. Not every effort takes root, but each nurtures the field of interfaith engagement.

In my own work with students, we cultivate relationships of meaning in which differences in lifestance are part of the glue that binds us. My Christian students are wary of the anti-Jewish polemic in the New Testament, for example, not simply because they were taught about it in class, but because I invite them to picture me sitting in their congregations. They grapple with Christian privilege because we construct an encounter that strips off the cloak of normativity; they see how privilege impacts their peers. Non-Muslims become personally invested in the fight against Islamophobia because they are in real relationship with Muslim classmates and communities, learning to be allies instead of saviors. As the coformative relationships grow, students develop the requisite resilience to work for social change because their commitments are not merely intellectual. Their own religious identity is bound up with an allegiance to pluralism—an energetic engagement with diversity and a commitment to seek understanding across lines of difference.<sup>38</sup>

Students of diverse lifestances begin to grasp the complex politics of representation, because they know people who do not fit in tidy boxes—interspiritual, spiritual but not religious, seekers—and they see how religious identity is dynamic rather than static. They come to know people who were not historically invited into interreligious spaces, like secular humanists and independent Catholics, and it presses them to think about who “owns” various traditions.<sup>39</sup> Students bring their collection of individual identities into

relationship, examining the very **(p.38)** specific intersections of race and class and gender and sexuality, and learning to become accountable to one another.<sup>40</sup>

Are these matters of vocation? Yes, if we take seriously the significance of coformation. Our relationships are central to our becoming. Especially as young adults, the borders of our being are porous and dynamic. Students come to know other ways of being and experience their identities not only as boundaries but also as meeting places. As the Qur'an reminds us, "Humanity! We created you from a male and female, and made you into peoples and tribes, so that you might come to know each other" (49:13). Through this process of mutual acquaintance, students recognize how their beliefs take shape in a complex, intersubjective world.

Coformation unfolds in sharing personal stories, as well as grappling together with the challenges and opportunities of higher education. The process asks students to be vulnerable to one another—to trust that the tensions will yield new insights, and that the journey together will enable them to live more fully into their commitments and to fulfill more deeply their human potential. They catalyze change in each other, making room for growth and even reinvention of self. "The lived experience of on-the-ground, co-inhabited cultural diversity" sustains a dynamic, global social context that is "always-in-the-making."<sup>41</sup>

Students learn to cultivate the fertile common ground among different lifestances. They may discover so much shared beauty that they become tempted to focus all their energies there, building bridges of understanding. But a "lowest common denominator" engagement between and among people who "orient around religion differently"<sup>42</sup> flattens the richness of traditions and dulls the growing edges of encounter. We should be willing to excavate our disagreements *and* cultivate our commonalities. While differences can be celebrated as expressions of the vital, vibrant diversity of human life, they can also occasionally lead to conflict; consequently, students should also learn to make space for difficult conversations. Coming to terms with irreducible difference yields, not a debate about conflicting truths, but a dialogical necessity.<sup>43</sup> This challenging terrain strengthens the sinews of students' lifestance formation.

### **(p.39)** My story: encounter with difference *as* vocation

How did I come to be doing this work? This essay maintains that engagement with difference advances our thinking about how we should live our lives—not that it necessarily presents a vocational path or calling in the classic sense of the term. On occasion, however, it may happen:

I was standing before the congregation on Rosh Hashanah as we came to the communal confession—a litany of all the ways in which we as human beings continue to miss the mark. It is customary to take your fist and softly strike your chest as you begin each phrase, "*Al chet shechatanu l'fanecha*—For the sin

which we have sinned against You. . . .” Never violent, this ancient breast beating still strikes some as odd in our day. I was taught to think of it as a knocking at our hearts, like a gentle rap at the door, asking the heart to open.

Who was knocking at the door of my heart on that day—one week after the attacks of September 11, 2001? Members of my New York congregation, certainly, some of whom lost friends as the World Trade Center buildings collapsed. My city, traumatized by the suddenly empty sky, etched by immeasurable sorrow. My nation, shuddering in its vulnerability, despite vast military might and oceans of protection. More insistently, however, I felt the knocking of those made instantly “other” by association: Muslims.

So began a journey of interfaith leadership, in which encounter with difference became my vocation. It started slowly. I convened a multi-faith service of mourning. Several leaders declined to read the excerpt I had chosen from the Qur’an; they thought it offensive to quote a sacred book that had also inspired the terrorist attacks. They must have forgotten how the Bible has similarly inspired great goodness and also “justified” violence. Perhaps they were unaware that right-wing extremism is responsible for the greatest percentage of terrorist incidents in the United States.<sup>44</sup>

**(p.40)** With no organized Muslim community in our area, we had no partners to present a different face of the faith. So I began to teach my congregation about Islam. (I had to learn something first.) Still, my world felt too small. Eventually, I left the congregational rabbinate, earned a doctorate with a focus on comparative exegesis, and began teaching at a primarily Protestant seminary.

It was there I met André LaCocque, a Christian scholar of Hebrew Bible, who was the first real interreligious leader at Chicago Theological Seminary. Over 30 years ago, André started the Center for Jewish, Christian, and Islamic Studies. He argued that one cannot understand Christianity without understanding its roots in Judaism; Jesus, after all, was a Jew.<sup>45</sup> When he first explained this to me as his primary motivation, I was troubled. Such study runs the risk of being interested only in pre-Christian Judaism—Judaism as a dead faith, not the living, breathing, vibrant faith of Jews today.

Then André told me the story of interreligious engagement in which he was transformed. In Belgium during the Shoah, his parents risked everything to hide a Jewish family. André spent the war pretending the child was his cousin. When André became a parent, he and his wife sent their children to Jewish day school, even though they initially faced as much suspicion and hostility as did Jewish kids who wound up in Catholic schools. André believed that, in order to know oneself, one needs to know the heart of the stranger—indeed, to *be* the stranger, to be transformed by the life and faith of the other.

I am not quite that bold, but I nonetheless came to realize that much of what I understood about myself, I too had learned through difference. My minority status as a Jew, for instance, made me committed to lifting up marginalized voices and emphasizing the profound multivocality within my own tradition. *Tikkun olam*, which posits a collective task of repairing the world so that it better resembles what an omnibenevolent God may have had in mind, became foundational for me, particularly once I “met” the fight for civil rights. Deep learning in other lifestances enhances my appreciation of Judaism and adorns my spiritual journey with special luminance. While I have long been able to articulate categories of my social location and recognize the tremendous advantages of my (p.41) white, cis-gendered, upper-middle-class, and heterosexual identities, I understand their implications and their intersectionality fully only through encounters with difference. This process of discernment is not about mastering theories of multiculturalism; it is about coming to know who I am and how I should live my life.

Ultimately, I am required to decenter myself; otherwise, the meeting of persons from different perspectives, as described throughout this chapter, can become merely an instrumental means to improve my self-understanding. Again, people should not be reduced to what they can teach us about ourselves. In the encounter with diversity, the formation of self means learning to live in ways that are responsible and accountable to others.

I decided to relaunch André’s Center for Jewish, Christian, and Islamic Studies; to work with the seminary leadership to make our school a fertile and inviting place for individuals of diverse lifestances; and to think about what it means to be, and to train, interreligious leaders. The drive to live in response-ability to difference, and to work toward the repair of the universe, can become a catalyst for the discernment of meaning, direction, and purpose.

My vocation is in need of you.

Response

Homayra Ziad

The search for commonality is a natural step in the art of relationship. Yet I am grateful to Rachel for reminding us that genuine growth takes place in the encounter with difference. Her chapter teaches us that when we approach boundaries as meeting places rather than as breaking points, we become far more significant interlocutors for one another. I may know that you and I build our systems of meaning on different sets of assumptions; yet not only do I see you as a complex human being, I also witness that your sources of wisdom have the capacity to enrich and challenge my own convictions. This encounter

requires hard work, individually and in community, as well as the discovery of resources within our traditions that inspire us to commit and to recommit.

As we see far too often, the mere presence of diversity does not necessarily bring about a productive encounter with difference. We may celebrate diversity in theory, but society often conflates difference and discord. In moments of doubt, **(p.42)** I take seriously the Qur'an's celebration of diversity as a gift from God that should be acknowledged and engaged:

Among God's wonders is the creation of the heavens and earth, and the diversity of your tongues and colors. There truly are signs in this for those who know. (Rum, 30:22)

People, we created you all from a single man and a single woman and made you into nations and tribes so that you might come to know one another. (al Hujurat, 49:13)

The call in these verses is to *know* one another. The word does not indicate a superficial encounter, or even a well-intentioned book-knowledge. It is a heart-deep knowledge borne of engagement—as Diana Eck names it, an encounter of commitments.

Here, the virtue of humility becomes critical. Humility creates the vulnerability that allows for this encounter. The Qur'an reminds me of this in the ubiquitous phrase *Allahu Akbar* ("God is greater") and in *wa fawqa kulli dhi `ilmin `alim* ("Above every knower is one who knows more": Yusuf, 12:76). Can we learn, as the Qur'an asks elsewhere, to challenge one another "in the most beautiful of ways" (an-Nahl, 16:125), with humility and with a willingness to be transformed? Can I learn to honor our difference in such a way that your joys and troubles become mine? And can we engage these dispositions in ways that help us create the pluralist democracy to which we all aspire?

### Notes:

(1.) Harry Stopes-Roe uses "lifestance" to enlarge religious discourse to include nonreligious perspectives without identifying such orientations by what they are *not*. He defines the term as "the style and content of an individual's or a community's relationship with that which is of ultimate importance; the presuppositions and commitments of this, and the consequences for living which flow from it" ("Humanism as a Life Stance," *New Humanist* 103, no. 2 [October 1988]: 21). Recent expansion of "interreligious" studies to include secular humanism, multiple religious belonging, "spiritual but not religious," and other lifestances presses for inclusive language.

(2.) Katherine W. Phillips, "How Diversity Makes Us Smarter," *Scientific American*, October 1, 2014, <https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/how-diversity-makes-us-smarter> (accessed February 23, 2017).

(3.) See, for example, Sheen S. Levine and David Stark, "Diversity Makes You Brighter," *New York Times*, December 9, 2015, based on their research "Ethnic Diversity Deflates Price Bubbles," *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* 111, no. 52 (2014): 18524–18529; Katherine Phillips, Katie A. Liljenquist, and Margaret A. Neale, "Is the Pain Worth the Gain?," *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin* 35 (2009): 336–50; M. J. Chang, "Does Diversity Matter? The Educational Impact of a Racially Diverse Undergraduate Population," *Journal of College Student Development* 40 (1999): 377–95.

(4.) See Patricia Gurin et al., "Diversity and Higher Education: Theory and Impact on Educational Outcomes," *Harvard Educational Review* 72 (2002): 330–66. Much of the social science research cited in this chapter can be discovered through the citations in Gurin's article. See also "Benefits and Challenges of Diversity in Academic Settings," [https://wiseli.engr.wisc.edu/docs/Benefits\\_Challenges.pdf](https://wiseli.engr.wisc.edu/docs/Benefits_Challenges.pdf) (accessed February 23, 2017). Several studies of the Higher Education Research Institute and Center of Inquiry at Wabash College also investigate the value of diverse learning contexts: <https://heri.ucla.edu/publications>; <http://www.liberalarts.wabash.edu/study-research>.

(5.) *Grutter v. Bollinger*, 137 F. Supp. 2d 821 (E.D. Mich. 2001), Brief of General Motors Corporation as *amicus curiae* in support of appellants, p. 2, [https://diversity.umich.edu/admissions/legal/gru\\_amicus/gru\\_gm.html](https://diversity.umich.edu/admissions/legal/gru_amicus/gru_gm.html) (accessed February 23, 2017).

(6.) Richard Guarasci and Grant Cornwell, *Democratic Education in an Age of Difference* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1997), xiii. On an interpersonal level, the focus on diversity is not a cure for systemic social ills; Ellen Berrey argues that it may actually *tame* the demand for racial justice, diverting our attention from the core issues of civil rights and empowerment (*The Enigma of Diversity: The Language of Race and the Limits of Racial Justice* [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015]).

(7.) For a discussion of this Latina theology and the role that *lo cotidiano* plays, see Ada Maria Isasi-Diaz, *Mujerista Theology* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1996), 67–73.

(8.) See, for example, Jerry Organ, "Of Doing and Being: Broadening Our Understanding of Vocation," in *Vocation across the Academy: A New Vocabulary for Higher Education*, ed. David S. Cunningham (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), 225–43.

(9.) See the contribution of David S. Cunningham in chapter 5 of this volume.

(10.) Henri Tajfel and John Turner, "An Integrative Theory of Intergroup Conflict," in *The Social Psychology of Intergroup Relations*, ed. William G. Austin and Stephen Worchel (Monterey, CA: Brooks/Cole, 1979), 33–47.

(11.) William Scott Green, "Otherness within: Towards a Theory of Difference in Rabbinic Judaism," in *To See Ourselves as Others See Us*, ed. Jacob Neusner and Ernest Frerichs (Chico, CA: Scholars Press, 1985), 50.

(12.) Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage Books, 1979), 332.

(13.) Zygmunt Bauman, *Modernity and Ambivalence* (Malden, MA: Polity Press, 1991), 15.

(14.) Jonathan Z. Smith, *Relating Religion* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), 275.

(15.) Jean Piaget, *The Moral Judgment of the Child* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1965). See also Lawrence Kurdek, "Perspective Taking as the Cognitive Basis of Children's Moral Development: A Review of the Literature," *Merrill-Palmer Quarterly of Behavior and Development* 24, no. 1 (January 1978): 3-28.

(16.) Rose Laub Coser, "The Complexity of Roles as a Seedbed of Individual Autonomy," in *The Idea of Social Structure*, ed. Lewis A. Coser (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1975), 85-102.

(17.) Smith, *Relating Religion*, 246.

(18.) Martin Buber, *I and Thou*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1970), 80, 62. A common alternative translation of this last phrase (*Alles wirkliche Leben ist Begegnung* in the original German) reads: All real living is meeting.

(19.) Joseph Soloveitchik, *The Lonely Man of Faith* (1965. New York: Doubleday, 1992), 36-37.

(20.) Emmanuel Levinas, *Otherwise Than Being or Beyond Essence*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1981), 114, 142-43, 152, 185, 199.

(21.) The Aramaic term appears multiple times in the Babylonian Talmud, presenting this range of meaning, e.g., BM 28a, Ber 6b, Suk 52a, BB 80a. Hasidic interpretations can be traced to the Baal Shem Tov, as cited in *Degel Machaneh Ephraim*. See also Abraham Joshua Heschel, *God in Search of Man* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1976), 287. Classical rabbinic understanding of *mitzvot* as commandments included many identified as responsibilities of one person to another (*mitzvot bein adam l'chavero*).

(22.) Lawrence Kushner, *The Book of Words* (Woodstock, VT: Jewish Lights, 1993), 91-94.

(23.) See Florence Amamoto's discussion in chapter 10 of this volume; see also Margaret E. Mohrmann, " 'Vocation Is Responsibility': Broader Scope, Deeper Discernment," in Cunningham, ed., *Vocation across the Academy*, 21-43.

(24.) *Zohar Hadash Shir haShirim 74d, Migaleh Amukot 186*. These medieval texts identify the people of Israel as the bearers of Torah's letters, since the Jewish covenant is an effort to embody its teachings. I take the liberty of applying the notion to a broader conception of the collective human enterprise.

(25.) See Miriam Taylor, *Anti-Judaism and Early Christian Identity: A Critique of the Scholarly Consensus* (Leiden: Brill, 1994); Jeremy Cohen, *Living Letters of the Law: Ideas of the Jew in Medieval Christianity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999).

(26.) Sacks, *The Dignity of Difference* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2003), 50-66.

(27.) Prophetic passages that warn against chauvinism include Amos 9:7: "Children of Israel, are you not just like the Ethiopians to Me, declares YHWH. Did I not bring Israel up from the land of Egypt, but also the Philistines from Caphtor and the Arameans from Kir?" Deutero-Isaiah insists that foreigners and eunuchs are equally part of the people as a result of their faithfulness to the teachings of Torah (Isa. 56). Yet the Hebrew Bible also portrays the figure of Ezra as objecting to intermarriage because it mixes the "holy seed" of Israel (9:2).

(28.) Haman also offers to pay 10,000 talents of silver into the royal treasury if the king agrees to order that the Jews be destroyed.

(29.) Jonathan Sacks, "Mishpatim 5768—Loving the Stranger," February 2, 2008, <http://www.rabbitsacks.org/covenant-conversation-5768-mishpatim-loving-the-stranger/> (accessed February 27, 2017).

(30.) Audre Lorde called the acknowledgment of difference an act of self-love. As a self-described black lesbian mother warrior poet, she realized that she could discover her true identity only if she let go of universal categories, truths, and expectations. Cited in AnaLouise Keating, *Women Reading Women Writing* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1996), 31.

(31.) Catherine Keller, *On the Mystery: Discerning Divinity in Process* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2007), 22. The internal quotation is from John B. Cobb Jr. and David Ray Griffin, *Process Theology: An Introductory Exposition* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1976), 23. For Jewish explorations of process theology, see *Jewish Theology and Process Thought*, ed. Sandra Lubarsky (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1996); Bradley Shavit Artson, "Ba-derekh: On the Way—A Presentation of Process Theology,"

*Conservative Judaism* 62, nos. 1-2 (Fall-Winter 2010): 3-35; Toba Spitzer, "Why We Need Process Theology," *CCAR Journal* 59, no. 2 (Winter 2012): 84-95.

(32.) Coformation theory has been applied in therapeutic settings and sociological analysis; see, for example, Bette Katsekas, "Holistic Interpersonal Mindfulness: Activities and Application of Coformation Theory," *Journal of Clinical Activities, Assignments and Handouts in Psychotherapy Practice* 2, no. 3 (2002): 1-12; Gaston Pineau, "Autoformation et coformation," in *Autoformation et lien social*, ed. Séraphin Alava (Toulouse: Éditions universitaires du Sud, 2000). Jennifer Peace utilizes the term in interreligious engagement: "Coformation through Interreligious Learning," *Colloquy* 20, no. 1 (Fall 2011): 24-26. See also my case study on coformation in a seminary context in Part 2 of Rachel Mikva, "Reflections in the Waves," in *Experiments in Empathy for Our Time: Critical Reflection on Interreligious Learning*, ed. Najeeba Syeed (Leiden: Brill, forthcoming).

(33.) Paulo Freire, *Education for Critical Consciousness*, trans. Myra Bergman Ramos (1974. London: Continuum, 2005), 124, emphasis added. Freire speaks of intersubjectivity and intercommunication as the "primordial characteristic" of our cultural and historical world (123). For more on the relevance of Freire's work for vocation, see Caryn Riswold, "A Pedagogy of Humanization," in *At This Time and In This Place: Vocation and Higher Education*, ed. David S. Cunningham (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), 72-95, as well as Jeff R. Brown, "Unplugging the GPS: Rethinking Undergraduate Professional Degree Programs," in Cunningham, ed., *Vocation across the Academy*, 204-24; here, 214-16.

(34.) Francis X. Clooney, *Comparative Theology* (Malden, MA: John Wiley & Sons, 2010).

(35.) Christian Smith and Melinda Lundquist Denton, *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 164-65.

(36.) James Fowler, *Stages of Faith: The Psychology of Human Development and the Quest for Meaning* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1981), 151-83. See also Paul V. Sorrentino, "What Do College Students Want? A Student-Centered Approach to Multifaith Involvement," *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 45, no. 1 (Winter 2010): 79-96, as well as the reflections of Matthew R. Sayers in chapter 8 of this volume.

(37.) For discussion of interactional diversity's impact on student development, see Ernest T. Pascarella and Charles Blaich, "Lessons from the Wabash National Study of Liberal Arts Education," *Change: The Magazine of Higher Learning* 45, no. 2 (March 2013): 6-15.

(38.) These elements are borrowed from Diana Eck's working definition of religious pluralism, <http://www.pluralism.org/what-is-pluralism> (accessed March 20, 2017).

(39.) See the comments of Trina Jones in chapter 2 of this volume. "Independent Catholics" refer to individuals and denominations who identify as Catholic but do not recognize the ultimate authority of the Vatican in Catholic life.

(40.) For unpacking of these complexities, see Rachel Mikva, "Six Issues That Complicate Interreligious Studies and Engagement," in *Interreligious/Interfaith Studies: Defining a New Field*, ed. Eboo Patel, Jennifer Howe Peace, and Noah J. Silverman (Boston: Beacon Press, 2018), 124-36.

(41.) Cinthya Martinez, "The East," in *Fleshing the Spirit: Spirituality and Activism in Chicana, Latina and Indigenous Women's Lives*, ed. Elisa Faco and Irene Lara (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2014), 27.

(42.) Interfaith Youth Core uses this phrasing to talk about religious difference; see Eboo Patel, *Interfaith Leadership: A Primer* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2016), 37.

(43.) Matthew R. Sayers helpfully pointed out that difference *does* sometimes lead to debate. Recognizing the tension generated by competing truths, one rabbinic text advises that we make our heart of many rooms in order to grasp contradictory ideas (*t. Sotah* 7:12). It does not intend the modern pluralism that we might hear in such a phrase; yet it clearly claims that diverse opinions derive from God, giving Divine authorization to polysemy. Its pluralism embraces an intellectual culture in which there were multiple schools of thought and positive value in teaching the controversy. For more on this point, see the comments of Noah Silverman in chapter 7 of this volume.

(44.) The Center for American Progress collated information on terrorist threats between 1995 and 2011: <https://thinkprogress.org/chart-17-years-after-oklahoma-city-bombing-right-wing-extremism-is-significant-domestic-terror-805653857c40#.6zh5ahnv0> (accessed March 24, 2017). When Christians suggest that the New Testament is free of passages that invoke violence, I cite a text such as Luke 19:27, the concluding sentence in one of Jesus's parables: "But as for these enemies of mine, who did not want me to reign over them, bring them here and slaughter them before me."

(45.) Although the point was once considered mildly subversive, Chicago Theological Seminary professors of New Testament have been teaching the texts through a Jewish prism for many years. They present Jesus as an observant Jew, and the literary assaults on the Pharisees as an internal Jewish polemic with the closest "competition." They recognize the Jesus movement as an emerging particularity, alongside other expressions of Judaism—all struggling to maintain

their identity over against the universalist imperial engine of the Greco-Roman world (even as they were also significantly impacted by it). These insights help to defuse some of the anti-Judaism that stained Christian teaching in history.