



Speaking for Interfaith Dialogue

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A personal account of transformation through interfaith encounter.

Speaking for Interfaith Dialogue

by **Beth Porter**

As a Roman Catholic, I knew almost nothing about the Jewish community or Judaism when, in 1989, my friend Ellen Weinstein remarked to me with pain during an Easter season service, "I'm a Jew but I didn't kill Jesus!" I was shocked as I listened to the scripture passage with my friend's ears and heard the anti-Jewish polemic; and I was deeply disturbed that a text in which I and other Christians found hope could contain such poison. I was disturbed also that I had not previously noticed it.

This is an account of transformation at the personal and communal level and, increasingly, in small ways, at the societal level. It is a transformation wrought because of personal encounters between Jews and Christians, and because of the gift that people with developmental disabilities have to call us all beyond ourselves and into relationship with "the other."

Ellen and I live in L'Arche Daybreak,* a community for people with developmental disabilities and the friends who assist them. L'Arche has strong Christian roots, but has some members of other faiths. Its family-like lifestyle attracted Ellen's parents when looking for a home for their adult daughter. Ellen likes to pray and attends Christian liturgies, but she has always been r that she is Jewish and occasionally reminds us, "Jesus was Jewish too, you know." I was drawn to L'Arche by its vision of a community where people with disabilities are valued and recognized as potentially a source of blessing for others; and by its desire, stated in the L'Arche Charter, to be in solidarity with all who work for justice.

Ellen's remark at that Easter service initiated an awakening that continued as I undertook theological studies and began to search for ways to help Ellen be affirmed in her own faith. Ellen's parents had long facilitated our celebrating Passover, but now the presence of Jewish members at Daybreak took on other rich dimensions for the rest of us.

Ellen and I found a welcoming Jewish congregation.** Ellen celebrated her Bat Mitzvah in 1994 -- a joyous occasion. Two years later Mel Kirzner, another Daybreak member, had a Bar Mitzvah. Ellen's and Mel's growth in self-esteem and confidence has been obvious to all. Kehillah members comment that they contribute importantly by their friendliness and need for support, calling all to attentiveness. Those of us from Daybreak who attend services with them are greatly enriched as we learn more about the Hebrew scriptures and recognize the Jewish roots of Christian liturgy. Meanwhile, our L'Arche community is being transformed by a new appreciation for Judaism. Last year Mel travelled with Daybreak friends to Poland and Israel. "I wanted to see where my ancestors came from," he explains. He also spoke on panels at Reena's International Conference on Developmental Disabilities and at the 16th National Workshop on Jewish-Christian Relations in Houston.

My studies, which included courses in Israel, gave me a foundation to talk and write about anti-

Judaism as an issue of justice that Christians need to address and to suggest an articulation of Christian theology that allows space for religious pluralism. I became active in Christian-Jewish Dialogue and have been deeply touched by survivor speakers while coordinating Holocaust Education Week programs in churches. My first article (for the Catholic New Times) was about Holocaust denial. Last Easter, I was asked to write for the Catholic missalette about the anti-Semitic history associated with Good Friday, and the pope's call for repentance and reconciliation. More often, though, I prefer to focus on the vitality of contemporary Judaism and what it can teach us. I have become active in Women's Interfaith Dialogue and serve on the Archdiocesan Interfaith Committee which is seeking to promote collegiality among priests and rabbis. I am encouraged by the work of some Catholic bishops and theologians, and embarrassed by insensitive actions of the Church: the long refusal to recognize the State of Israel, the recent canonization of Edith Stein, the convent and crosses at Auschwitz.

Speaking out on matters that may be perceived by some as threatening to their faith can be lonely. I find encouragement at L'Arche and with other Catholics who have come to see the importance of Christian-Jewish relations, and in my friendships with people of diverse affiliations in the Jewish community.

The transformation I have described could only happen because Jewish people received and befriended me in spite of negative feelings they may have had regarding my Roman Catholic identity or my gentile ineptitude -- not knowing at first even what I could bring to a pot-luck in a kosher home, or not to take notes during Shabbat services! For their friendship and help, I am deeply grateful. May many others in both the Jewish and Christian communities be open to building such bridges!

* L'Arche Daybreak is a member community of the International Federation of L'Arche communities.

** The Kehillah Ahavat Hesed in Toronto

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