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Religious Hope in Anxious Times
(Ps. 126; Exodus 1: 8-22)

In 1965, schoolteacher and satirist Tom Lehrer found a way with a light touch to address the serious state of our world. Perhaps some of you remember his song, concerning nuclear proliferation, "Who's Next"?

First we got the bomb and that was good,
'Cause we love peace and motherhood.
Then Russia got the bomb, but that's O.K.,
'Cause the balance of power's maintained that way!
Who's next?

Egypt's gonna get one, too,
Just to use on you know who.
So Israel's getting tense,
Wants one in self defense.
"The Lord's our shepherd," says the psalm,
But just in case, we better get a bomb!
Who's next?ⁱ

This has been an anxious summer and fall as we learned of two dangerous nations who were next--- Iran and Korea are crashing the gate of membership in the nuclear club. This has been an anxious summer and fall in the Middle East, as flashpoints in Gaza and Lebanon heated up to fronts in a yet another war. This has been an anxious summer and fall as sectarian violence in Iraq has escalated to the proportions of civil war. The litany of reasons to be anxious about the state of our world grows each week. It is difficult not to want to retreat from this destruction and despair. It is difficult not to want simply to hold close those whom we love and to try to protect them and ourselves from so much that we cannot control. How much simpler to dwell in a blanket of indifference.

But for some of us, what may be halfway across the world is actually very close to home-- Families in our community with sons and daughters in harm's way in Iraq and Afganistan; Iranian students here at Stanford questioned by government agencies concerned about their research and their political links; relatives and friends living precariously in lands ravaged by war.

What does religion offer to us in anxious times? In too many places, religion exacerbates conflict. Do those same traditions have the capacity to assuage our anxiety, to comfort our fears, to hold out the possibility of hope?

I recently read of a Muslim mother living in Manhattan who, after September 11th, stopped speaking Arabic in public. She wanted to protect her children, her family. Horrified by the face of Islam which terrorism wrought, she questioned whether she and her children should remain true to Islam. She feared that being a Muslim had become more of a burden than a privilege in America. She began to study and as she did so, she came to recognize that she was the teacher she had been waiting for.

This Palestinian Muslim woman, Ranya Idliby, stirred up by September 11th, determined that she would find a Jewish mother and a Christian mother to partner with her to create a children's book to highlight the commonalities in the Abrahamic traditions. She did find two other women for her project, Priscilla, a Reform Jew, and Suzanne, a faithful Episcopalian. But the path to a congenial collaboration was fraught with detours and difficulties. Ranya, Priscilla and Suzanne learned about each other, each other's religion, and confronted the stereotypes, the historic hurts, and the misconceptions each of them held about the other. They created what they called, "The Faith Club." ⁱⁱThey met weekly, their loyalty to their families and their faiths blossoming into a fierce promise to hear and try to understand one another. They refused to shy away from potentially explosive topics. Very quickly, they stopped hiding behind Jesus, Moses and Mohammed and confronted their own emotions. Early on, a discussion of Jesus' crucifixion triggered Priscilla's fears. For centuries, the crucifixion provoked and justified anti-Jewish violence. Lurking beneath her cosmopolitan demeanor, Priscilla wondered, did Suzanne regard her as a Christ-killer? Ranya related her family's exile from Palestine at the hands of Israelis. Priscilla absorbed her

pain and empathy forced her to tease apart the twins-criticism of Israeli policy and anti-Semitism. Ranya insisted that the other two not exempt her from their stereotypes of Muslims and anoint her, but her alone as "The Good Muslim".

In due course, Suzanne confessed to her own prejudice. During her church's renovation, a hospitable synagogue made available their sanctuary for Sunday services. When they'd pass the corner, Suzanne's children would proudly cry, "Mommy! There's our temple!" Her immediate reaction was to hush them, fearing, "People will think we're Jewish." And then came some soul searching: "Why am I so uncomfortable with the thought that I might be mistaken for a Jew?"ⁱⁱⁱ.

With their unflinching commitment to build trust, even while casting a clear-eyed look at their differences, the women came to rely on each other. They attended services at one another's place of worship. They confessed their doubts and challenges concerning their own religious. They supported one another through the inevitable crises of motherhood and family life. Through the prism of one another's experiences, their religious commitments evolved. With Suzanne's and Priscilla's encouragement, Ranya, who had felt spiritually homeless, found a community of like-minded progressive American Muslims; Challenged by Priscilla's and Ranya's experience of being adherents of minority faiths in the West, Suzanne began to question some of her adherence to classical Christian doctrine; Touched by Ranya's and Suzanne's firm beliefs in Allah, in God, Priscilla became more comfortable praying to and talking about God. For these three women, strangers who once occasioned wariness and distrust, religion provided a road to friendship, to understanding, to a deeper faith and to engagement with the unknown. Their very differences pointed the way to connection: learning about their own and their friends' religions provided them with hope in anxious times.

Ranya's vision and the Faith Club's engagement in learning across difference provide a model for how to handle today's insecurity. The passion to reach out, to foster understanding even in the midst of confusion, to believe in the value of listening, to trust that one person, one family, one teacher, can matter, reminds each of us of our own power. These three women are trying to create a movement. They have a book and a website,

directions on how to being a Faith Club, and encouragement for how to dispel ignorance and fear between communities of difference.

It is not surprising that when Ranya wanted to find kindred spirits from different religious communities, she deliberately sought out other women who were mothers. She knew that mothers of every tradition had to calm their children's fears, and right the world for them, just as she had for her own children. Many of us learn how to cope with our fears and gather our strength in the protective embrace of our families. Scholar of religion Susannah Heschel learned how to cope with fear and gather strength from her father. Susannah writes fondly of their long, luxurious walks together full of attention and conversation. Susannah's father was Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel. A refugee from Hitler's Germany, a warrior for civil rights, an outspoken critic of the Vietnam War, philosopher and activist Rabbi Heschel was no stranger to anxious times. As a young woman, reading his philosophical writings, listening to his speeches at anti-war rallies, participating in impassioned discussions around the Sabbath table, Susannah knew how deeply engaged her father was in the work of "high moral grandeur and spiritual audacity", as she titled her book of his essays. She watched him absorb disappointments and setbacks. But when she asked him whether he despaired over war or anti-Semitism or racism or the fate of humanity, her father used to say, "Susannah, I'm an optimist against my better judgment"^{iv}. "I'm an optimist against my better judgment". For Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, while the world may have provided ample reason to lose hope, religion provided him with a foundation for optimism.

How did he do this? I think that Rabbi Heschel lived very much in the present for all of his sixty-five years, but he also lived in the timeless stories of Jewish tradition. He drew personal strength from narratives of religious resilience. He emulated those biblical figures who resisted injustice with whatever tools and imagination they could muster. Think, for instance, of those Hebrew midwives who refused Pharaoh's orders to kill Israelite babies when the Israelites were enslaved in Egypt. According to the Midrash, the Pharaoh not only tried to kill newborns; he also attempted to prevent conception. He forbade the Israelite men from going home to their wives, decreeing that they must remain in the fields to sleep.

Undaunted, optimists against their better judgment, the Israelite women made themselves alluring, brought dinner and drink to their husbands in the field and...well some of you are college students—you can guess what happens next! Even in the face of their powerlessness and vulnerability, even as slaves experiencing crushing oppression, these women and men, committed themselves to the future. {And} In the Talmud, Rabbi Akiva declares: For the merit of those righteous women of that generation the Israelites were redeemed from Egypt." (Midrash Tanhuma, Talmud Sotah 11b)

To be certain that faith has endured through darkness before, to know that our ancestors and our traditions have a claim on us is to wrest from our religions, a source of hope.

We never know which gestures—grand or simple, courageous or fortuitous will bring a measure of redemption. When Stanford graduate and Wall Street Journal reporter Daniel Pearl was kidnapped and murdered in Pakistan by Muslim extremists, his family might have met this tragedy with despair and hatred. They might have turned away from religion and condemned all religious adherents. Instead, Danny's parents, Judea and Ruth, created a foundation to foster understanding and global harmony. Knowing that Danny's last words affirmed his Judaism, they edited a book entitled, I Am Jewish, bringing together famous and ordinary people's reflections on their Jewish identity. They asked people to examine their religious commitments, to teach others, to create connections.

Danny's widow, Marianne, is a Buddhist. She says that years of Buddhist practice gave her the clarity to see what the terrorists' goals were and taught her how to resist them. Buddhism gave her a spiritual practice of defiance that sustains her. She says, "If I was somebody who could not trust people anymore because of what happened to Danny, then they would have claimed some part of my soul. ... If I was overwhelmed by bitterness, or if I hated Muslims... I knew that if I was going to be bitter, I was going to be half dead, and that's exactly what they wanted, right? I can't do that. It's impossible. But it's a defiance, it's not a forgiveness."^v As Marianne Pearl reminds us, even amidst utter inhumanity, religious traditions can teach us that there is another way. An ancient Jewish text says,

"Bamakom sheain anashim, histakel lehiot ish", "In a place where there are no human beings, strive to be human."

There is no doubt that we live in anxious times. But as Danny Pearl's family, Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, and Ranya, Suzanne and Priscilla of the Faith Club teach us, there have been anxious times before, and even in those times, religious people have found a way to grow toward light, justice and hope.

When we are filled with uncertainty, many of us literally, seek out sanctuary. We come together in prayer to find the reservoirs of inner strength we have forgotten or never knew were ours. We come to sanctuaries to remember to hold onto life as our greatest blessing despite its inevitable losses, its complexities and paradoxes. We come together to affirm vitality no matter how anxious are our times.

And today, in this sanctuary we heard this promise:

"When the Eternal restores the fortunes of Zion, like in a dream, our mouths shall be filled with laughter, our tongues with songs of joy." Our dreams affirm: There will be a time when anxiety will yield to laughter. Our teachers promise: There will be a time when lamentation will yield to songs of joy. "Those who sow in tears shall reap in joy. He who goes weeping on his way, bearing a bag of seed, shall come back with a joyful shout, carrying his sheaves." (Ps. 126: 5-6) However fallow the land, this psalm reassures us, green shoots will yet make their way up through the soil. We will be able to eat at the table of fullness, of equality, of safety and of rest. But it is up to us to prepare that soil, by building understanding. It is up to us to prepare that soil, by being optimists against our better judgment. It is up to us to prepare that soil, by defying hate and inhumanity, and modeling for others and ourselves, the power of hope. The Talmudic sage Hillel teaches, *Im ain ani li mi li*, "If I am not for myself, who will be for me?" We, each of us, have to sow those seeds. We, each of us, have to prepare that soil. We, each of us, have to tend the land. *U'cshe ani l'atzmi ma ani*, "But if I am only for myself, what am I?" Our bounty is not for ourselves alone. It must be shared. Our tables must be filled with those of different experiences, traditions, histories. We cannot be satisfied with assuaging our own anxiety if the world is still filled with

so much of it. *v'lo achsav eimatai*. "And if not now, when?" There is no time to lose. May we who sow in tears, reap in joy. May our mouths be filled with song. And may we sing of safety and comfort in a chorus of many religious traditions.

ⁱ Tom Lehrer, "Who's Next" from the album, *That was the Week that Was*

ⁱⁱ Ranya Idliby, Suzanne Oliver and Priscilla Warner, *The Faith Club: A Muslim, A Christian, A Jew—Three Women Search for Understanding*, (Free Press, 2006)

ⁱⁱⁱ *The Faith Club*, p. 56.

^{iv} "William Sloane Coffin: An American Prophet" produced by John Ankele and Anne Machsoud, New York, Old Dog Documentaries, 2004

^v Marianne Pearl, quoted in American Media Program: Speaking of Faith
<http://speakingoffaith.org/programs/pearl/emailnewsletter20061019.shtml>