

“Many Faiths, One Campus”

Like the story of Jacob, the story of many college and university students is one of leaving home and beginning a pilgrimage to a place where the future is unknown. Jacob left home as a teenager, his leave-taking filled with complexity and a farewell blessing bestowed by deception. Jacob went alone. He had no parents proudly accompanying him to his new room and meeting his roommates. There was no elaborate orientation program welcoming him to the next step on his journey. His first night away from home must have been fraught with demons, fears, imagined dangers and terrible loneliness. He placed his head on a rock and closed his eyes against the dark. And alone in the wilderness on a journey filled with the unknown Jacob had a dream, and he found comfort in it.

For while Jacob was alone in sleep, he was accompanied in his dream. Upon a ladder, firmly rooted in the place he was sleeping, but reaching up beyond his sight, were figures in motion, figures called in Hebrew *melachim*—which means both angels and messengers. The *melachim* were ascending and descending—going forth and returning, rising and falling, mirroring dreams attained and dreams denied. In the transition from youth to adult, Jacob was not alone. Messengers accompanied him, messengers who helped him to know what to strive for

and how to cushion a fall; messengers who helped him to remember the best he can be.

For undergraduates, about the same age as Jacob when he ventured away from home, there is a lesson in his experience. Together with peers and teachers, the transition from youth to adult occurs within a congregation of messengers. That congregation of fellow learners and teachers, of friends and mentors, witnesses for the students, the aspirations and the disappointments, the preparation for and the achievement of their dreams.

In the Biblical story, Jacob exclaims, "How awesome is this place! This is none other than God's house." (Genesis 28:17) And how awesome, too, is the university experience-- filled with friends, memories, rituals, community. A place filled with messengers of vision, with those who can imagine the heights to which students might climb, a place filled with those who hold their dreams, those who soothe them through their mistakes, those who cheer along the way, and those who celebrate their accomplishments and achievements as they move from adolescent to adult.

While most students begin their journeys as individual Jacobs, alone and dreaming, they climb the ladder with others. For it is in community that one's unique odyssey of education becomes not only an education of the mind, but also of the heart and spirit.

At Stanford, many of those on the ladder, witnessing and accompanying the journeys of our students, bring traditions, values, and celebrations from diverse religious and cultural backgrounds. In this dream, that ladder is characterized by inclusivity. This dream contains melachim from the many religions that color and shape and explain the world. When most American universities and colleges were founded, they were rooted in Christian tradition and theology. Now, in many places, the tethers that bound them to Christianity have been loosed, and students of many traditions other than Christianity are likely to be accompanying one another on their paths.

On any given week in our building that houses Stanford's religious communities, can be heard the Muslim call to prayer, Buddhist prayer bells, Shinto Taiko drumming, Hindu chanting, Native American drumming along with Hebrew davenning, and Catholic mass.

The wonder of campus life is that students live in neighborhoods characterized by diversity. Today, our students study together, eat together and live together, discovering and educating one another about practices and celebrations that may have previously been utterly unfamiliar. Given the role that religion is playing in the public square and around the globe, exposing students--particularly those whose educations

will enable them to attain positions of leadership and authority in the world—exposing students to religious diversity, and helping them to understand the power and depth of religion is critical.

A few weeks ago I moderated a panel on the “religious geography of the dorm”. Three Muslim undergraduates all living in the same residence discussed their practice of Islam. A Malaysian student wearing hijab, the traditional Muslim head covering talked about the shock of being a minority in America after living her first 18 years in a Muslim country. Another woman, whose long black hair flowed down her back, explained that her native Turkey was a secular state, so she identified herself as a secular Muslim. A young man with Indo-Pakistani roots shared his experience growing up a practicing Muslim amidst the eclectic Christianity of New Orleans. The narratives of their religious journeys were varied and fascinating. Their demeanor was approachable. Their dorm-mates were curious.

The opportunity to live with and learn from those with a different religious orientation may not easily happen beyond the campus. Sociologist of Religion, Robert Wuthnow conducted a survey in fourteen American cities known for their religious diversity. He looked for mosques, Hindu temples, synagogues and Buddhist temples and then identified churches in the immediate vicinity of these religious institutions—often next door or across the street from them. Despite the proximity, only 7% of his

Christian respondents had ever attended a service in one of the other religious institutions more than once. Less than 5% of the Christians he interviewed were very familiar with the basic teachings of Islam, Hinduism or Buddhism and only 14% were very familiar with the basic teachings of Judaism.ⁱ What Wuthnow reveals is that while we may claim that we value diversity, we are a long way from living out a dream of reflective pluralism, even when we worship next door to each other. Indeed, as a country, we are confused about two conflicting strands in our self-concept. "American identity is an odd mixture of religious particularism and cultural pluralism." Wuthnow says. In his new book, America and the Challenges of Religious Diversity, he examines the relationship between America's Christian heritage and its growing religious diversity. He describes a "layered pluralism"—a commitment to the civil rights of minority religious adherents, but riddled with ignorance about their beliefs and practices. He attributes that ignorance to a view that Christian truth is sufficient unto itself.ⁱⁱ

This ignorance and disinterest is difficult for those from non-Christian tradition, particularly in December, when the balance between particularism and pluralism is nowhere to be found.

I think of “White Christmas” — the quintessential song of this season that is played in every department store across the nation. It was written by a Russian Jewish immigrant who changed his name from Izzy Baline to Irving Berlin. With “White Christmas”, Berlin created a new genre of music—the secular Christmas song. You all know the words and the images it evokes; treetops glisten, sleigh bells, snow; what you may not know is that he wrote it while living in Beverly Hills, where the only treetops were palm trees and the only snow was artificial. Here is the song’s introduction, which, incidentally, was never recorded:

The sun is shining

The grass is green

The orange and palm trees sway.

I've never seen such a day

In Beverly Hills LA.

But it's December the 24th

And I am longing to be up North.ⁱⁱⁱ

Jody Rosen writes in his book, White Christmas: The Story of an American Song, “From the beginning, the song has been a blank slate on which Americans have projected their varied views on race, religion, national identity, ... The song became a hit in the winter of 1942, when it was embraced by homesick American GIs as a symbol of the country to which they longed to return and the values they were fighting to defend.”

“Berlin created an anthem that spoke eloquently to its historical moment, offering a comforting Christmastime vision to a nation frightened and bewildered by the Second World War. But it also resonated with some of the deepest strains in American culture: yearning for an idealized New England past, belief in the ecumenical magic of the “merry and bright” Christmas season, pining for the sanctuaries of home and hearth. Its dreamy scenery belongs to the same tradition as Currier and Ives’s landscapes and Robert Frost’s “Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening.” The song’s images of sleigh rides and falling snow and eager children capture the mythic essence of the American Christmas. “White Christmas” seems to have always existed, lurking, as one Berlin biographer has written, ‘just beneath the surface of national consciousness.’”

Here we are more than 60 years later. How do we understand such a powerful mythic evocation of our yearnings in a community and culture where Muslims, Shintos, Buddhists, Hindus, and Native Americans share dorms, workplaces, and perhaps even the same street?

Berlin’s unrecorded introduction gives us a clue. Paradoxically, “White Christmas” is an ode offered by a Russian born Cantor’s son to Christian America. Berlin may have dreamed of, yearned for a white Christmas, but it did not belong to him—he was an outsider, his face pressed up against the windowpane. In order to participate in Christmas,

in the holiday spirit so ubiquitous and so joyful, he had to imagine a Christmas without Christ. And even after creating a secular Christmas anthem, the memories he offers so powerfully, were not his memories—they were his longings. Longings of a kind of world in which there was a welcome mat out for people like him; people who spoke with an accent, people who didn't live on a quiet tree lined street, people who didn't fit the Currier and Ives painting. What Berlin portrays, and what so many of us still long for in our dreams is a Home for the Holidays world where everyone has a hearth and a home, where everyone belongs, everyone has a place, and every place is pristine, healthy and peaceful.

Central to Berlin's vision is an imagined community of shared values. As a Jew in the 1940s, he found a balance between Christian particularism and cultural pluralism. But this reconciliation is not one that we can easily affirm today. Despite its familiarity and ubiquity, "White Christmas" makes us uncomfortable. The message it conveys, of a uniform dream cloaked in Christian symbols, no longer resonates for a multifaith and multicultural community, reveling in diversity.

Like Berlin, I want a community of shared values, but the fulcrum has shifted. The inclusivity I want to create on campus, the dream I want to affirm for our students is one where we can be close together, where we

can teach and reflect with one another, while being respectful of our differences. In my dream, the new student center for religious and spiritual life we are planning for, in the heart of the campus, will contain a sanctuary designed for a ritual “movable feast”—appointed properly for each tradition that uses it, but open to and welcoming of any of the building’s diverse religious participants. Perhaps it was said best in one of our planning meetings for the new center by, the Chabad Rabbi at Stanford. “For millennia, we were building prayer spaces to keep each other out. For the first time, we are thinking about how to build a place to welcome one another in.” But if the plan is new, the sentiment is ancient. As we just read in Isaiah, “My house will be a house of prayer for all peoples.”

This inclusive vision offers a language with which to make sense of the sacred, and affirms a conviction that open-mindedness and godliness are kindred. But we should not be naïve about a competing vision, a vision of religious exclusivity that is gaining power and visibility throughout our nation.

Evidence of an emboldened Christian exclusivity is much in abundance this holiday season. Indeed, in the militant terminology of the exclusivists, we are in the midst of a “War on Christmas”. In addition to

calling for a boycott of stores that wish their customers “Happy Holidays” rather than “Merry Christmas”, some exclusive Christians have a new beef—the Christmas card sent out by George and Laura Bush. The cover of the card reveals the presidential pets on the White House in the snow, and inside is a Psalms text rather than a New Testament verse, “The Lord is my light and my shield. In Him I trust.” What’s the problem? “Him” is unspecific. They are offended that Jesus is nowhere to be found on the card. Oy! Here it is—in a rather trivial vignette—Christian exclusivists battling White Christmas!

Parenthetically, as a Jew, I must say that the mantle of victimization donned so readily by Christian exclusivists is ill fitting at best. Wuthnow’s research confirms that over three quarters of all Americans believe they live in a Christian country, founded on Christian principles. Those who are invisible at this time of year are scarcely the Christians. Those who are invisible are the Hindus, Buddhists, Baha’is, Muslims and Jews.

The relationship between Christian exclusivity and a new religious pluralism will be negotiated not only in the university, but also in our neighborhoods, in our schools and in our zoning boards. What we know of one another, what we understand of one another’s experience, will play a critical role in the religious values of tomorrow’s America. Whose dream

will prevail will depend in part upon which messengers bless us, which messengers accompany us on our journey.

At this season, when as a culture we take stock, when we gather round the people we want to accompany us through the winter's darkness, we need tropes, melodies that can sustain us, that can bring us hope and nourishment. So here, then, is another American musical dream, a dream from that place of poverty and destruction that has so captured our attention of late, a dream of New Orleans.

This dream is a dream of jazz, a genre that thrives on variation, on change, on experimentation, on humanity. It is the dream of jazz musician and composer Wynton Marsalis, entitled, "All Rise".^{iv} "All Rise" was commissioned by the New York Philharmonic and premiered at this season at the turn of the millennium in that quintessential place of American dreams, New York City, and recorded in Los Angeles in the tense days following Sept. 11th. The music speaks of ascendance, of togetherness, of appreciating the contributions of people and music from all over the world. In explaining his musical vision, Marsalis remembers pianist Jelly Roll Morton saying, "We had all nations in New Orleans, but with the music, we could creep in close to other people." And Marsalis adds, "Finally, the world is so small that we don't need music to creep in

close to other people; they are close. The larger question of the moment is, "What do we have to say to each other?"

The variety of musical styles that Marsalis includes in his composition—symphony orchestra, symphony chorus, jazz orchestra, instrumental solos, vocal solos—convey musically that this dream is enriched by the distinctive contributions from many sources and traditions. Marsalis says, "When we finally find each other, the heat of recognition will cause our souls to rise. We will be truly at home in the world."

"All rise" starts with four joyous movements, followed by four somber and poignant movements and ending with four dance movements. Through the music, the instruments, the back and forth of the piece, it is clear that in Marsalis' vision, it is not one person, one community, one race, one religion or one tradition that will rise above the others, but that we will all rise when we communicate with, live with, celebrate with one another. In the last movement, which he calls "I Am", an authoritative female soloist repeatedly insists that we "all rise". A chorus of voices and instruments joins her pointing us to look higher, look beyond. We need one another to ascend, to dream, to become who we are. Only then can we say, "I am". Wynton Marsalis' musical dream is comprised of diversity, variety, passion kindled from many sources. It calls to mind the

words of feminist theologian Mary Daly, "Our liberation consists in refusing to be "the Other and asserting instead "I Am", without making another "the Other." ^v

In the university and in our lives, we can be like messengers helping one another to assert, "I am". We can be committed to living a dream of "We are". In this time of fear, war and terrorism, of looking inward and objectifying the other, our commitments to one another and to the education of the whole person could not be more essential. William Butler Yeats wrote "True education is not the filling of a pail but the igniting of a flame." As we celebrate our country's myriad and multiple holy days this season, as we gather together with those we love, may we rekindle the flames of true education, may we renew the heat that keeps us creeping in close, and, warmed by home and hearth, may we all rise on the ladder of dreams. Amen. Merry Christmas!

ⁱ Robert Wuthnow, America and the Challenges of Religious Diversity, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 2005 p. 206

ⁱⁱ Wuthnow p.73

ⁱⁱⁱ Jody Rosen, White Christmas: The Story of an American Song, Scribner, 2002

^{iv} Wynton Marsalis, Program Notes, "All Rise" in Playbill for San Francisco Symphony, Nov 20-23, 2002

^v Mary Daly, Beyond God the Father, Beacon Press, 1993, epigraph