

Getting to the Heart of Interfaith

The hope-filled friendship of a Christian, Jew, and Muslim

...by Adam Conley

A pastor, rabbi and a sheikh share a deep, abiding friendship.

If that sounds like the set-up to a joke, well, the Seattle-based Interfaith Amigos don't need to be walking into the proverbial bar to share a good laugh. For Pastor Don Mackenzie, Rabbi Ted Falcon and Sheikh Jamal Rahman, humor is as vital to their work and friendship as exploring questions related to the meaning of life, theology, spirituality, and humanity.

Yet while they esteem laughter, the work and influence of the Interfaith Amigos is certainly not a joking matter. The title of their recent book, *Getting to the Heart of Interfaith* (Skylight Press 2009), describes the bond of friendship that formed between these three amigos soon after the horrific events of 9/11. The friendship was forged out of a shared willingness to open their respective hearts and minds to each other's faith traditions as much as it was borne out of things that often bring people together: music, dance, laughter and love (Don is a musician, Jamal can dance, and Ted has a wry sense of humor).

Since 2001, they have held teaching engagements and workshops all over the United States and in Israel-Palestine. When Don, Ted and Jamal teach, write and talk about their interfaith journey, they are describing their ever deepening belief that all faith traditions and open-hearted paths of spiritual inquiry ultimately lead to a shared understanding of the

universal and a natural impulse to act in positive and impacting ways.

The Interfaith Amigos say that interfaith is as much a verb as it is a noun. It is equal parts doing and being, and a powerful way to affect change in the world for peace, unrestricted access to healthcare, the elimination of poverty, and

stewardship of the environment.

These are grand and noble ideas, but the Interfaith Amigos are not clichéd in their idealism. They believe that by building friendships and listening to each other, people are able to identify shared commonalities and learn from disagreements.

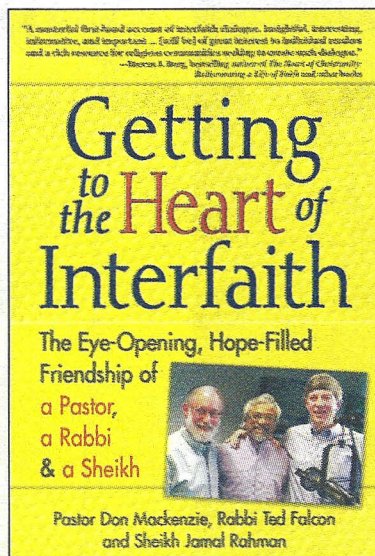
This is true for their personal friendship as well. "We're very different, not just in terms of our faith traditions, but also in terms of our personality," observes Ted, laughing. "I get the most upset about things, Jamal the

least, and Don is somewhere in the middle, and this has led to some pretty hilarious situations on our travels together." He goes on to say that by sharing personal celebrations as well as challenges, the Interfaith Amigos have laughed together, cried together and "increasingly developed a bond of true friendship that we could never have initially imagined." This bond of friendship comes out strong in their workshops, which combine teaching with music and humor.

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The Interfaith Amigos reiterate their belief that meaningful interfaith dialogue and action begin at a very personal level. As Jamal puts it, their message is "about individual completion, not individual conversion." This is the place where personal and theological differences begin to be understood and are ultimately overcome. He says that when we establish personal relationships, disagreements cease to exist as threats.

The Interfaith Amigos are more interested in living faith than in defending it. They point out that



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defensive postures inevitably lead to tragic consequences like war and religious crusades. Jamal observes that historically, "people fight and kill for what they believe, rather than living for what they believe." The Interfaith Amigos seek to live what they believe by spreading a message of hope that all of us can live what we believe in harmony with our neighbor.

When asked about the best way to disarm individual and societal conflict and begin to pave a way toward mutual understanding, the Interfaith Amigos return to their principled and heartfelt suggestion that we listen to, acknowledge and love those who disagree with us. As Rabbi Ted puts it, "we have found that talking about faith allows people to experience a deeper connection to their own faith, and the faith of others."

"We learn as much from our agreements as our disagreements," observes Don, who shares his amigos' belief that the agreements between different faith traditions are ultimately greater than the dissensions. To illustrate, Jamal paraphrases one of his favorite verses in the Koran: "If Allah wanted, Allah could have made us all one community. Rather, Allah chose to give us different communities for one reason: that we might get to know one another."

In their book, the three friends

identify the overarching teaching most prevalent in each of their traditions—Judaism teaches oneness with God, Christianity teaches unconditional love, and Islam teaches uncompromising compassion. According to Ted, there is a deeper nature to our being that has the potential to ultimately recognize and reconcile these "beautiful core teachings." He goes on to say that "the spirituality inherent in each of our traditions supports a greater feeling of peacefulness, a greater sense of joy, a bigger imagination and a larger sense of security."

All three religious leaders identify a unique reception to their teaching by generations both young and old. The young are eager and hopeful, and senior citizens, as Jamal puts it, "have gone through the experience of life and often have a more open heart and mind for listening and compassion." By virtue of their life experience, they have already laid the groundwork for "developing the inner spaciousness" necessary to facilitate the true work of interfaith. ♦

You are invited to a free talk by The Interfaith Amigos held in the newly opened auditorium of Chateau St. Laurent at Bothell Landing on Tuesday, November 10 from 2-4pm. 17543 102nd Ave NE in Bothell. Free admission but space is limited, please RSVP at 425-485-1155. For more information about The Interfaith Amigos and their book, visit interfaithamigos.com