

Harvesting Learning While Building Bridges



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My colleague, Dr Hamidah Marican and myself facilitate a dialogue of life experience called Building Bridges, Connecting Communities. We began this in 2008 and have done this in various forms with varying degrees of success. We do not measure success in numbers of participants or high-level press releases – but in the significant changes in attitude and interactions of the persons who have participated in these workshops. They become catalysts of change, bringing a more inclusive perspective into their life and work when relating with others.

Deep Learning from My Journey

This is my experience of Building Bridges in the light of the words of Micah 6:8

*He has shown you, O mortal, what is good.
And what does the Lord require of you?
To act justly and to love mercy
and to walk humbly with your God*

For me, the key for Building Bridges is the last line – walk humbly with your God. There are activists and groups clamoring daily in our current situation for justice and mercy and equality of rights and representation. That is well and needed. However, not much is said about walking humbly. Here is my take on it

There are people who comment that a programme like Building Bridges is too wishy washy – ignoring the real problems that divide society. I believe that there is more than enough airtime given to dismal news. Also, there is limited time to interact face to face in seminars and symposiums that talk about

race, religion and various perspectives – it's often, just a repetition of positions and perspectives with some time given to questions. The same ground is covered again and again leaving listeners with a sense of frustration about what needs to be done.

In the Building Bridges workshop, the key is to provide time and space for participants of different ethnicities to interact, listen and share views in a safe space such that there is a real encounter with the other. The result is shared perspectives and greater understanding. This is for me – a way of walking humbly, with each other and with God. Can we really see our Creator in the being of our neighbor, whoever that neighbor may be?

Each person needs to experience this walk as an individual journey. Hamidah and I experienced it as we got to know each other from our first meeting in 2008.

I only developed real friendships with Muslim girls and women in my adult years – in university and whilst working in a private hospital. There I met individuals who shared common views and perspectives and we could enter into conversations about life and our common shared struggles at work and at home. Prior to that time, I lived in a bubble of my Christian family upbringing, surrounded by people of my own faith and beliefs. My Social Science background opened my mind to accepting and appreciating difference -but it did not answer the existential question of why it was the way it was in Malaysia. Though I had minimal negative perceptions of any community in Malaysia, I really did not have a close friend who was also a Muslim. There seemed to be a barrier to that which all my training in sociology and psychology could not overcome. In the 8 years I served as a religious, my spiritual foundation taught me that all humanity shares the fatherhood of God and each of us is unique and precious in His sight. Yet, it was difficult to see that in my communications with Muslims – especially in the face of what I saw as unfair affirmative rights and practices in our society.

As I got to know Hamidah and we shared our personal challenges and difficulties, I realized that the perceptions I had held earlier were too simplistic and tarred a whole community for the actions of the few who would manipulate the system. Inequality and prejudice exist within a community just as much as it exists across communities. When we come to know individuals as persons and friends, we then truly see them and listen to them. We will find it much harder to typify every group by its stereotype and instead we start to see them as individuals also having to deal with inequality and life challenges. We will begin to see people as they are – and relate to them differently.

Since we started the workshops with communities in 2018, my world has been enriched with people of all faith traditions, men and women who sincerely want to reach out to others and be more inclusive. They come to our workshops as strangers to each other – often, from very different environments and cultures. We have welcomed Muslim, Bahai, Hindu, Christian and Buddhist, as well as activists, LGBT, Orang Asli, and other categories of Malaysians. They leave with a sense of knowing who we are as Malaysians, and a realization and deeper sense of self awareness. We begin to know them, even as we become known to them, as sharers in humanity. We begin to walk humbly with them, and in so doing, walk humbly with our God who breathes life into persons.

I have entered my 6th decade and have developed a certain resilience to what life brings to my doorstep. I am certain that the Lord holds all in His hands, and He will work it in His own time. We may experience this as long waits or delays – but I have a sneaking suspicion that the delays are given to us as opportunities to cleanse ourselves that we might be ready for Him.

I spend my waiting time, working and walking with my Muslim friend, building bridges and connecting communities. We share an understanding of how our work links us to our faith and praxis. Yet, we live in our different faith traditions, as we realise we are products of our upbringing and culture. We accept our limitations of being bound in time and space. We realise too that in working together, we witness to others that this type of partnership is a possibility for others too. We may be different – yet we can live and work together for what we believe is important for our society and our beliefs.

My wish for those of you who read this is that you too may open your hearts and minds to welcoming someone from a different faith tradition as a friend. You will find that your world opens, and you see a whole new way of being. You too may find new ways to walk humbly with another, and in doing so, walk humbly with your God.

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*20 July 2019 session @SFX
Representatives from Muslim, Bahai, Christian
and Hindu communities, across generations and
educational backgrounds.*