

# Dovetail

A Journal by and for Jewish/Christian Families

## What Can We Learn from Other Kinds of Interfaith Families?

For more than four years now, Dovetail has been exploring the challenges and opportunities of life in Jewish/Christian families. During this time, we have received countless requests for information from couples whose dual-faith families included religious traditions other than Christianity and Judaism. In this issue of *Dovetail*, we seek to examine life in other kinds of interfaith families, with two goals: to compare the challenges we in Jewish/Christian families face with those other interfaith families face, and to see how our common struggles put all of us in a unique and transformative position. We all share the challenges of respecting two distinct heritages within one marriage, of navigating uncomfortable boundary lines, of being true to our own nuclear families while maintaining connections with our extended families. We can learn from one another, and we can join forces to combat intolerance.

A *Time* magazine article on intermarried couples (Fall 1993 issue, pp. 64-65), which included profiles of Jewish/Christian, Hindu/Christian and Buddhist/Christian families, opined that "the world still has much to learn about living with diversity. [The pain of intolerance] is evidence that America has yet to harvest the full rewards of its founding principles. The land of immigrants may be giving way to a land of hyphenations, but the hyphen still divides even as it compounds. Those who intermarry have

perhaps the strongest sense of what it will take to return America to an unhyphenated whole."

In other parts of the world interfaith couples face much more difficult responses to their decision to marry. In the former Yugoslavia, dual-faith marriages are the source of much controversy. Before the war, 45 percent of the families living in Sarajevo were mixed. In response to the anguish caused by the war, the Islamic community and some segments of the press have called for mixed marriages to be banned. "Most mixed marriages break down," wrote a columnist in late 1994 in Sarajevo's daily *Ljiljan* (as



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Those of you with strong powers of observation will have already noted that with this issue of **Dovetail**, this publication has become a Journal, rather than a Newsletter. This change was suggested by readers and advisory board members alike, to reflect our growing size and scope. As we enter our fifth year of publication, we at **Dovetail** plan to continue to expand our horizons, bringing you more articles, more information, and more resources you can use in your daily lives. Let us know what you think of the changes you see, and what specific needs you have in your own interfaith family. You can call us toll-free at 800-222-0070, fax us at (616) 342-1012, or reach us by e-mail or postal mail at the addresses listed below. We look forward to hearing from you.

## Dovetail's Staff

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quoted in the January 1995 *World Press Review*, p. 29). "Differences between Muslims and non-Muslims are so glaring that we must advise the coming generations not to marry people who don't think as they do. In this way, we will build a society free of trauma."

Mustafa Spahic, a leader of the Islamic community, publicly agreed with this columnist. "For us, the rapes [of Muslim women by Serbian militiamen] are horrible and incomprehensible," he said. "But they are less painful and easier to accept than all these mixed marriages and all these children born of mixed marriages."

In Indonesia, a largely Muslim country, a similar discomfort with the concept of mixed-faith marriage exists. In the early 1990s, the government began to explore ways of sanctioning interfaith marriage, which was officially forbidden, in order to stem the tide of couples living in sin. Religious Affairs minister Munawir Sjadzali explained

**Dovetail's** mission is to provide a channel of communication for interfaith couples, their parents and their children. The more families can share their ideas, experiences, resources, and support, the more they can make peace in their homes and communities. Jewish and Christian perspectives can dovetail.

Believing that there are no definitive answers to the questions facing interfaith families, **Dovetail** strives to be open to all ideas and opinions. Editorial content attempts to balance and respect the perspectives of both Jewish and Christian partners in interfaith marriages, as well as the diverse perspectives of parents and children of interfaith couples. Inclusion in **Dovetail** does not imply endorsement. **Dovetail** accepts a thoughtful and constructive discussion of all related issues in the Letters to the Editor section, and reserves the right to reply.

that "we are a multi-religious community. Two people from different religions can fall in love with each other. And sometimes, love is so strong." The Indonesian press responded with vigor against Munawir's comments, crying out for the promotion of family loyalty and religious conviction over what is widely perceived in Indonesia as the result of interfaith marriage—broken homes and Godless children.

The stories of interfaith couples on the following pages make evident the strength of our similarities. We all make compromises, and we all learn to understand and respect the different beliefs of our spouses. We all face the occasional loneliness of not being able to share our traditional faith expression with our life partners. And we all grow spiritually from the experience of living intimately with someone of another faith. Let us seek ways to support one another on the journey. 

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**Dovetail** welcomes article submissions (query or completed manuscript), letters to the editor, and comments or suggestions. Send to Joan C. Hawxhurst, Editor, at the above address. We look forward to hearing from you.

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# What Interfaith Couples Can Teach Us

Rev. John Wade Payne

**A**t the Copenhagen Zoo, a novel exhibit has been attracting large crowds. On display between the cages for orangutans and lemurs are two live homo sapiens—a Danish couple exhibited behind a plexiglas wall. Zoo visitors pause, surprised—exactly the directors' intent: think! Think about the common origin of all life. Think about our relationships with other homo sapiens and with all of earth's creatures. As the caged couple, Malene Botoff and Henrik Lehmann, said of their peculiar temporary vocation, "We place our similarity with all other creatures in context—we are a mirror."

They usually find their lemur neighbors entertaining, except at night. Malene noted that there are "only two of them, but they make a noise as if there were thirty. Exactly once every hour they mark their territory with uninhibited screaming."

We *homo sapiens*, too, have an innate need to mark off our own domain; but we also desire to emphasize the oneness of all life. This dilemma is an apt metaphor for both the opportunities and the challenges of the interfaith experience, whether in a committed relationship between two individuals or among the peoples of this shrinking planet.

## Marking Religious Territory

As a pastor in my cherished Christian tradition, committed to the institutional church for over four decades, I have consistently pondered this predicament. On the one hand, nearly every great teacher or prophet revered among the faith traditions

has urged and pled for people to open themselves and to reach out beyond their own tribal or ethnic or historic heritage. On the other hand, almost every institution claiming one of these teachers as a preeminent model has set boundaries and parameters which all too often betray their mentor's vision and hope.

Christianity is no exception. While I can speak only for my own tradition, it takes no great skills of observation to note that "territory marking" is standard procedure among earth's religious institutions. Over and over one hears the claim that to enlarge our circles of culture and religion, or to intersect them with other circles, is to fragment—and ultimately to destroy—them. Thankfully a debate has begun. Challenges are being mounted against university curricula that only emphasize European-American literature and philosophy and all but neglect eons of other continents' heritages. Not everyone buys the stereotypical "family value" flags that have little to do with the challenges families actually encounter.

## Broadening the Circle

In our society few will live abundantly in isolated, narrowly demarcated territory, be it political, geographical, cultural or religious. I dream of the day we can each bring our own unique commitments and traditions to the human feast, and thus begin to approach peace and hope for our planet, as well as meaningful lives for earth's people. My experience has been that such a "risk" is anything but. Each step into a broader circle never fragments but consistently enhances my faith

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To learn more about the religious traditions referenced in this issue, see the following resources:

**The Religions of Man**, by Huston Smith. New York: Harper & Row, 1986.

**The World Treasury of Modern Religious Thought**, edited by Jaroslav Pelikan. Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1990.

**Foundations of Religious Tolerance**, by Jay Newman. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1982.

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Membership on Dovetail's Editorial Advisory Board does not necessarily imply endorsement of the articles and opinions expressed herein.

tradition. Venturing forth has enriched and enlivened my heritage as I have encountered reflections of the divine, embraced and grasped in the experience of others.

From the exotic experience of standing one cold wintry day at the edge of a pueblo square in New Mexico watching in wonder as a sacred corn dance festival progressed, to rediscovering my own Hebrew roots while sharing a seder feast with Jewish friends at Passover, to listening to the simultaneous polyphonic sounds created by the voice of Buddhist monks in their holy liturgies: each intensified within me the grandeur of the sacred among us. As a result the practice of my own faith, its rituals and culture, were magnified as I discovered more of the breadth of the spiritual experience.

Of course, I am not naive enough to believe that such experiences would automatically diminish or negate the challenges should a member of a parish or one of my own children embrace a life partner whose faith heritage is from another tradition. But I deeply believe that an approach which seeks to dialogue, understand and discover commonalities while respecting and honoring differences is not a threat to cultures, but the only realistic way to preserve them. My own experience has broadly confirmed that among those for whom faith or tradition count, the marriage or the partnering of two different faiths in one household has been marked with healthy yearning and seeking. Religious institutions which do not respect and support this process are themselves, often unwittingly, contribut-

ing to the perpetuation of the tragedies of tribalism.

## Through a Glass Clearly

History records the sad stories of colonialist territory-marking of both land and faith. Too many annihilations dot the annals of time. I yearn for a day when we bring our unique heritage to the human family, not to mark off our territories (with the subtle implication either to "stay out!" or abandon your past and come to us), but to offer them as our contribution to the whole. Our cherished faith traditions and the institutions will assuredly flourish as we commit ourselves to dialogue—affirming, honoring and learning from the richness of the human experience of the sacred. Mirrors to ourselves and windows to the hallowed will always be found in those other *homo sapiens* coming our way. ■

# Christian-Muslim Couples Share Their Stories

*The following stories reflect actual Christian/Muslim relationships. Some aspects of the stories have been changed in order to preserve anonymity. Readers will note that in both cases, the woman is Christian and the man Muslim. According to Islamic tradition, a Muslim man should enter marriage either with a Muslim woman or with a woman belonging to the People of the Book (Jews and Christians), in which case the wife is free to practice her religion. On the other hand, it is believed that a Muslim woman should marry only a Muslim man.*

## Ali and Pamela

Ali and Pamela came to a college pastor, excited by their engagement and seeking her participation in their marriage after graduation. Pam is an active Christian whose own pastor refused to consider participating in her marriage to a non-Christian. Ali was born in the United States to Pakistani parents. He is Islamic by background but was nonobservant during his childhood. His mother is a housewife, and his father is a university professor and international consultant who has travelled often throughout the Islamic world.

Because Pam is a professing Christian, and because Ali promised to support her religious practice and have their children baptized, the college pastor agreed to officiate at their wedding, scheduled premarital counseling and asked about family reactions to the engagement. Pam reported that her family loved Ali but were worried she might be hurt in an interfaith marriage. They were looking forward to meeting Ali's family. Ali had not told his family; they were "too busy," he said. He promised to tell them the next Sunday when they gathered for dinner.

When Ali and Pam came for the second appointment, they were somber. Ali had told his mother of his engagement and prospective wedding. Immediately his mother had lashed out at him, fled upstairs in tears, donned Islamic dress and refused to come down until "that woman" was out of her house. Now his mother still refused to speak to him, and he had been told not to come home for Sunday dinner anymore. Ali was confused: "All I wanted to do was raise my family just as I had been raised—no religion at all. When did she get so religious?"

The reservation for the university chapel was cancelled. Ali's father returned hurriedly from an overseas trip. Ali and Pam, with four friends present, were married in the chancel of a church with a pastor officiating and signing the marriage license. Immediately afterwards, Ali's father—waiting outside in a limousine—took the couple to the Islamic Center in a nearby city for the official signing of the contract in the presence of the imam.

Ali does visit his family, and he brings his sons and daughter. Pam never accompanies him, and he never eats Sunday dinner at his parents' home.

## Betty and Sami

Betty, an evangelical Christian, has been married to Sami, a Moroccan Muslim, for seven years. Sami has made the pilgrimage to Mecca and observes the call to prayer each day. Betty is a Christian who has experienced strong personal renewal in her faith. Both have deep respect and love for one another, including deep respect for their religious faiths.

Sami and Betty make their primary home in Morocco, but come to the United States regularly. Betty dresses and conducts herself very properly in the context of her Islamic society. She makes sure that she and their three children do not eat pork, even when they visit Christian homes in the United States. Sami whispered the name of Allah into the ear of each child at birth, and all three children also received Christian baptism. Wherever they are, Betty reads Bible stories and other Christian literature to the children. When she is with her family, Betty and the children participate in church school and various other church activities. They do not go to the mosque, either in the United States or in Morocco. When he is in the United States, Sami frequently attends Sunday church worship services and is happy to be introduced to the congregation.

The oldest child will enter a Moroccan school soon. Islamic religious instruction will be a regular part of the curriculum. Betty's parents wonder what will happen with the religious life of the children. ❏

*The stories shared on this page are excerpted with permission from "Interfaith Marriage: A Resource by Presbyterian Christians," prepared by the Office of Ecumenical and Interfaith Relations, Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) and available from PDS, 100 Witherspoon Street, Louisville, KY 40202-1396; 1-800-524-2612. Request order #243-92-010.*

# Take Your Shoes Off My Books: Negotiating a Hindu-Catholic Marriage

Jo McGowan

*This article is excerpted with permission from the June 18, 1993, issue of **Commonweal**, pages 15-17.*

**W**hen my husband, Ravi, and I married thirteen years ago, we had plenty of God-given disparities to keep us busy. I was twenty-one and he was thirty-three. I am American and he is from India. I am a practicing Roman Catholic; he is an observant Hindu. We live in India on less than \$5,000 a year. You would think that when we disagreed, it would be over something more substantial than a sofa set.

You would be wrong. The sofa set in question belonged to friends who were being transferred and wanted to sell it. Without exactly discussing it with my husband, I arranged to buy the set. He was at work when it all arrived—an enormous couch and two large chairs. Even I had to admit that the effect was a bit staggering.

Our children tumbled the length of the couch and did headstands on the chairs, just as I had done in my childhood. And just as my mother had, I scolded them about ruining the springs and pointed out the heel marks on the walls. I gave that up, however, as it suddenly occurred to me that I was proving my husband's contention that we were becoming a bourgeois, middle-class family eager for a life of indolence and wealth.

Before moving to India, it had never occurred to me that a secondhand, eight-year-old sofa set could be a status symbol. But then again,

I grew up in America, where reality is very different. To me, a refrigerator is an absolute necessity; to Ravi, pure luxury.

I got the fridge on day one, but it was the smallest model. It was I who banned a television, although Ravi would love one (for "information"),

and we both agreed not to invest in a car (although dragging three children on Indian public transport isn't easy).

These discussions, however, were reasoned and logical and had to do with practical concerns: milk spoiling, the effect of TV on family life, and the convenience of a car vs. the expense and the pollution. We seldom got emotional and we usually could explain ourselves.

The sofa set, on the other hand, seemed to touch both of us in a deep and inarticulate way, stirring up images of childhood and forcing us to confront our values, both individually and as a couple.

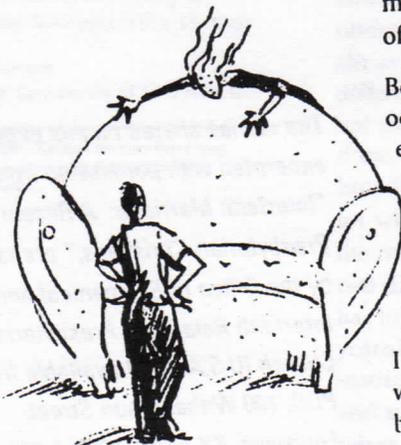
To me, a big, comfortable couch is at the center of family life. I got quite emotional describing my memories to Ravi: the afternoon story hours with my mother in the center of the couch and all seven of us ranged on either side of her; the days when I was home sick and my mother set me up on the couch, by my side a box of tissues and a bell to call her; the times when she sat nursing the current baby, cuddling her or him until sleep arrived. . . . "It's like a big kitchen table," I concluded. "It's essential."

Ravi focused first on a side issue. "You rang a bell for your mother?" he asked, horrified.

"Only when I was sick," I said, defensively.

"It doesn't matter how sick you were. A child never rings a bell for her mother, as if she were a servant."

"Well, unlike you," I said hotly, "we didn't grow up with servants, so the thought of treating my mother as one never occurred to me. And anyway, it



was a big house. A bell was practical." He just shook his head, still shocked, still unconvinced. "But, anyway, Ravi, the point isn't the bell—it's the couch."

He, however, refused to concede anything. My comparison to the kitchen table fell flat: he didn't grow up with one. In his family, the children ate in a long row on the floor while the grown-ups took turns at the very small fold-down dining table. Family spirit did not suffer as a result.

As for the couch, although they had not one but three in their living room, there were no cuddling sessions or story hours there. Children and adults operated in separate spheres and the couches were for entertaining adult guests.

It was the middle-class propriety of it all which bothered him now, so many years later: the formal entertaining, the apparent desire to impress one's guests with possessions. It didn't matter, he pointed out, whether we thought of a sofa set as a great acquisition; everyone else most assuredly did. "My activist friends think I've sold out," he said.

The discussion could have gone on and on. Worlds farther apart than a Hindu's India and a Catholic's America are hard to imagine, and at times I wonder how we ever thought our love could bridge the gap. Our favorite stories are of the times we transgressed some deeply held belief of the other's, all the while totally unconscious of having offended.

My worst mistake occurred soon after our marriage. Preparing for a trip in a rush, I put a pair of shoes on top of a pile of books and forgot to move them. The happy mood of our return evaporated instantly

when Ravi saw my shoes.

"Who did this?" he shouted, leaping to snatch them up off the books.

"Did what?" I asked, bewildered, thinking perhaps we had been robbed.

"Put these shoes on top of these books?" he thundered.

"Well, I guess I did. What are you so upset about?" I was still bewildered.

When he calmed down (it took a while), he explained that what I had done was a sacrilege. Books were a representation of Saraswati, the goddess of wisdom. To put shoes, the dirtiest thing an Indian can think of, anywhere near her was contempt and profanity of the worst kind. "Please don't ever do it again," he begged me.

Needless to say, I never have; and now, after so long in India, the idea of it shocks me as much as it did him.

His first mistake was not quite so dramatic. We spent our wedding night and the day after on Cape Cod and the next evening we drove back to our apartment . . . stopping on the way to pick up his visiting family.

This seemed strange to no one but me. For the next two months (our honeymoon!) I lived as if in a foreign country. They spoke almost exclusively in Punjabi (not a word of which I could understand), cooked only Indian food, went shopping in Indian stores, and entertained Indian friends and relatives.

It troubled me most that he didn't really understand why I was so upset. Of course, he could see that no one enjoys being left out, but he couldn't see why the timing bothered me so.

"We've got our whole lives to be

together," he pointed out quite logically. "We'll have our honeymoon once they leave. This is a once-in-a-lifetime trip for them."

But even while I conceded that I was being selfish and immature, I still believed there was something crucial in the fact that he didn't share my disappointment. And indeed, as I learned more about the Indian concept of marriage, I found I was right. To him, my awkward situation was perfectly ordinary: a new bride in India must adjust herself to a *family*, not, as the Western version would have it, be one of a couple adjusting to each other.

To his credit, Ravi has more or less gracefully accepted the fact that much is required from both of us. He has occasional relapses when we are with his family; old habits die hard. But I am no longer twenty-one, I speak the language now, and I have made my own adjustments, not the least of which has been learning to make *chapatties*.

The difficulties of a cross-cultural marriage are enormous, there can be no denying. But the rewards are equally great. Many American couples begin married life with a sense of charting unknown waters, mindful of the dangers of the journey and the flimsiness of their vessel. Here in India, the path is so well-worn and safe, arrival so probable, one hardly considers the bullock cart one is traveling in. And at the end of the day there's that couch to sink into. Like our marriage, it looks like it's here to stay. ▀

# Life in a "Buddhist/ Ambiguous" Family

Shannon Ahern Ikeda



*Shannon Ahern Ikeda is a fourth-generation Irish Canadian living in Los Angeles with her first-generation Japanese husband and their 4-year-old son. She works at a developer's training education firm in Torrance, California, where her son attends Japanese preschool; her husband owns a sushi bar in Hollywood.*

**W**hen asked to share my reflections on living in a mixed-religion household, I was unsure what aspects of my life might genuinely hold interest for anyone else. Although not as uncommon as perhaps even a few years ago, our situation is still unusual, and I suspect every mixed family is unique unto themselves, as well. As I began considering what it means to be raising a bicultural, mixed-faith, bilingual family, I was surprised at the complexity of the cultural negotiation we continuously navigate, often with stress, but tempered with joy, pride, and increasing independence.

I was raised in a nominally Irish-Catholic household, but in my parents' generation there is no one who devoutly observes Catholic ritual in our family. I chose to convert to Buddhism when I was 16 years old. My father was happy with the quality of the people he met when he accompanied me to the Buddhist temple, and also with the changes he had witnessed in me after I started practicing Buddhism, so he was very supportive.

## Outer Realities

Our household is both mixed-religion (I am Buddhist, my husband ambiguous) and mixed-culture (I am Canadian, he is Japanese, and we live in Los Angeles with our American-born son). My husband believes in God and has some vestigial Shinto leanings that are more cultural than religious *per se*. But since he subscribes to no specific affiliation, I am left quite free to expose my son to my faith (and others) to whatever degree I choose. My husband is remarkably open-minded in this regard. I suspect our biggest philosophical difference is his tendency to have an

"eye-for-an-eye" approach to life, whereas my Buddhist perspective is grounded in a sense of personal responsibility for ourselves and our surroundings, including people or circumstances that are not to our liking. Therefore, if another child were to hit our son, my husband might say, "Go hit him back!" whereas I might say, "Why do you think that child did that? How can you improve this situation, rather than make it worse? Can you create something positive here?"

Fortunately, we don't seem to encounter much trouble concerning holidays, as we both believe in respecting and learning about various faiths and cultures. We have a Christmas tree every December (my husband's first was the year we were married!); we eat traditional Japanese New Year's soup called Zoni every New Year's Eve; we hunt for Easter Eggs in April; hang up a huge, brightly-colored fish banner (called a Koi-nobori) for Boy's Day every May; dress up for Halloween; and celebrate two Thanksgivings: Canadian (in October) and American (in November). We go to one friend's house for a Chanukah evening every year and to another friend's house to share the seder.

## Inner Realities

In many ways, I am fortunate to be in a mixed-faith marriage with a person whose culture recognizes my religion as mainstream and normal, although he himself does not practice it. He understands burning incense to purify the air and lighting candles to illuminate truth in a way that many western people do not. He knows the concept of karma as a way to describe the principle of cause and

effect in the universe, not, as many westerners do, as simple "determinism." However, now and then I do find it lonely being unable to share my faith with my husband. There are times when I am going through difficulties and would like him to somehow support me—to sit with me while I am chanting to develop and tap my buried wisdom and compassion, to try to see my problems through my eyes instead of his, to read some Buddhist theology and discuss it with me, to help me find my inspiration when it is lagging. But I know this is not likely to happen. Likewise I imagine he sometimes feels the same way when he is down or grappling with a difficult problem in his life. Although I have tried to encourage him to share his beliefs with me, generally he demurs, saying his relationship with God is too private and difficult to explain in English.

### Social Realities

We have often discussed the expectations and assessments others make of us, and that we unconsciously make of each other in our daily lives. We realized, after about two years of marriage, that we had the most disagreements and problems whilst in the company of exclusively Japanese or exclusively American friends. It seems that, at those times, when one of us is in the comfort zone of the familiar culture, that person tends to be less tolerant, less patient, more defensive and less gentle in communicating with the other, which of course generates misunderstandings and conflict. We have come to realize it is much more critical that we focus on who we are, what our relationship means to us, and the vision we have for ourselves and our son, than to worry about what others think, or try to

accommodate pressures that automatically exist due to our cultural divide. We see ourselves as creating the future—we don't fit anywhere perfectly, because we are beyond the old limitations of either of our cultures. We celebrate our son's breadth of experience: attending Japanese preschool because I, not my husband, selected the school; reading the English alphabet and Japanese characters; watching Sesame Street and Anpan-Man; eating cheese burgers and tofu and challah, curry and gyros and sauerkraut dogs, colcannon and scones and latkes.

### Ultimate Reality

As I considered what is most difficult and also most wonderful about our family, I came to the conclusion that the labels we give ourselves are not necessarily the essence of who we are, but merely facets of who we are, and that indeed, such labels sometimes create more pressure and obstacles than perhaps is warranted. When we were married (we sort of eloped, but told everyone first), my stepfather, Jackie Rae, wrote a wonderful poem for us, which we had inscribed on our reception invitations:

What difference the culture?  
What difference the tongue?  
Though one be of east,  
The other of west,  
When joined together in the  
language of love—none.

Perhaps this simple, powerful sentiment will inspire other couples to persevere, creating beautiful families and having faith in themselves and their commitment to one another, while appreciating and sharing their respective religions and cultures. ▀

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## Meet Dovetail's Editorial Advisory Board

*In response to inquiries from our readers, we're introducing a different member of our diverse and experienced advisory team in each issue of **Dovetail**.*

### Rabbi Dr. Arthur Blecher

Arthur Blecher is both an ordained rabbi and a practicing psychotherapist who has extensive experience with interfaith couples and their families. He received his Master's degree in 1972, was ordained in 1975, and completed his Doctoral work in 1994. He received his clinical training at therapy centers in New York City and in Washington. His Doctoral research was based on in-depth interviews with 200 interfaith couples.

Dr. Blecher has published several works in the area of Jewish history and literature, as well as journal articles in the areas of theology and of family counseling. He is the co-author of **The Jews of America: History and Sources** and the author of **Interfaith Couples in the Rabbi's Study**.

In addition to his counseling practice and his congregational work, he conducts workshops for interfaith couples. Dr. Blecher is a member of the Washington Board of Rabbis and is licensed by the DC Board of Professional Counseling.

# An "Inter-Everything" Couple

Steve Habib Rose and Elaine Waller-Rose



*Elaine and Steve Habib Rose live in Seattle, Washington. Elaine is a psychotherapist and is very involved with the Dances of Universal Peace. Steve's work on the Internet includes the tariqas discussion list for members of different Sufi orders.*

**A**s an interracial, interreligious, intercultural, inter-most-things-you-can-think-of couple, we've been asked more than once how we reconcile our differences. Elaine is an African American of Christian background, who practices Buddhism as her spiritual path. Steve Habib is ethnically Jewish, and practices Sufism (mystical Islam) as his spiritual path.

While these differences appear to many to be overwhelming, our experience, in many ways, has been quite the opposite. Disagreements exist, but we find that most of our experiences add richness to our lives, rather than causing a rift between us. And, we have learned to work out our disagreements through constant communication. We also are willing, much of the time, to observe ourselves honestly and to admit when we need to grow.

One of the reasons we don't have major difficulties related to spirituality is that neither of us is attempting to manipulate or convert the other to our own world views or beliefs. We see each other's path as a personal way of growth, and of developing a relationship with the other's "higher power." Over our years together, we have seen each other change for the better, including overcoming personal obstacles and having greater levels of openness. We attribute much of this change to our spiritual journeys.

## Steve

"I have a lot of respect for Buddhism," Steve Habib says. "The idea of non-attachment has been very helpful to my own spiritual path. I find Buddhist thinking, especially

Zen, to be very insightful. I particularly appreciate the wonderful ability of many Buddhists to laugh at themselves, and not to take things too seriously. In Los Angeles, the International Buddhist Meditation Center each Christmas makes little "Santa Claus" cookies—but with a likeness of Bodhidharma, who brought Buddhism to China. Delightful!

"In a way, Elaine represents this ability by (most of the time) not taking herself too seriously. One time when we were out hiking, she fell in the mud. If it had been me, I would have started cursing or something, but she just burst out laughing! She realized how ridiculous the situation was—and it turned what could have been an unpleasant experience into a joyous memory."

## Elaine

Elaine agrees. "While Buddhism and Sufism look very different on the surface, I continue to see new parallels. It's hard for me to imagine being unsupportive of Steve's faith. Buddha taught about the path to enlightenment, which I believe is the same thing the Sufis mean when they talk about surrender to Allah. While the language and ideas are different, we continually find ourselves talking about similar things we both can relate to. I feel real joy in the fact that Steve and I are walking these two paths together. I'm benefiting from close exposure to two beautiful spiritualities.

"Also, I can't begin to say how thankful I am for what Steve and other Muslims and Sufis we know have taught me about diligent practice. Anything you do five times

a day [Muslim prayer] has to become a part of your core. I want to develop that kind of dedication in my meditation. I also admire their attempts at constant mindfulness of and trust in Allah as God, teacher, creator and friend. When I spend time with Sufis, I and my path are respected. I count these friends among my sangha (community of followers of "the way"). They are loving, encouraging and I always leave having learned something."

### Interplay

The general harmony we've experienced around spiritual matters does not mean there are no differences that must be worked through. Steve remembers the first time he saw Elaine and others doing prostrations or bowing before Buddha images in the meditation hall. It struck him as weird. With more exposure to Buddhism, it became clear to Steve that the statues were there to provide a focus for attention. Elaine says, "I could just as well bow to you or a homeless person or a prophet. It is saying that Buddha nature is in you and I celebrate that nature and try to learn from it."

Steve feels that real spirituality is based on what is in a person's heart. He says, "If a person appears to be praying to God, but their real thoughts are on work or sex or power or status, then they are committing idolatry." Steve admits that, by this standard, he commits idolatry as much as anyone—so he is in no position to judge anyone else!

Elaine often goes to Sufi Dhikr (prayer) meetings, and participates. She says: "It helps me focus on the qualities of surrendering to a

benevolent higher power and doesn't feel like a contradiction. But the first time I went I had to deal with some unfamiliar things. Covering my head was fine, I've done that in church. But, I had an immediate bias about the separation of men and women (as did Steve). No one pressured me to participate, though, and I decided to just experience it. I had never experienced the power of prayer and chanting with a group of women. That part of it was wonderful."

When we're open and there's nothing to prove, we do experience the "best of both worlds." This was the case with getting married. After five years we decided to celebrate our relationship by marriage. Steve wanted a Sufi wedding with a lot of guests. While Elaine was enthusiastic about a Sufi wedding, she wanted an intimate Buddhist ceremony at the temple she attended. We decided to have both. The Sufi wedding included readings from our four spiritual heritages: Judaism, Christianity, Buddhism and Islam. Both weddings were lovely and memorable for us both.

Our weddings were not "ordinary" by any means. They were a reflection of our individual uniqueness, and of our uniqueness as a couple. While our relationship might seem strange to many people, it works for us. We have been together for nine years, and we continue to get closer despite—and because of—our differences. ❧

# This is My Family Portrait

Amy R. Kaplan

*Amy R. Kaplan is a freelance writer in Sacramento, California, where she lives with her husband Richard and two home-schooled sons, William and Gaelan, ages 8 and 4.*

**H**umans like to simplify, yet we are complex. Nature thrives in complexity. Humans do, too. When I am filling out an enrollment form and I am asked to answer the very simple question about the race of my child, I am confused by the complexity of my family portrait.

If it's a question of what religion we observe, we are Jewish. If it's a question of culture, well, American, Eastern European, Southern, renegades, revolutionaries, Mexican, Texas Panhandle, describes us. One family member encountered Pancho Villa; at about the same time, Trotsky stayed with the other side of the family. My sons have this richness to draw from all their lives, but I can't find a category for our family on the school enrollment form.

## Richard's Family Picture

My mother-in-law Lupe was born in El Paso. She grew up on her father's ranch in the Mexican state of Chihuahua and near his general store in Fabians, Texas. Lupe's papa rode off with or was kidnapped by (we don't know which!) Pancho Villa. We also don't know much about the old aunts in Chihuahua who wore mantillas and lit candles on Friday nights. My mother-in-law is proud that she can read and write Spanish. But not one of her five children is fluent in her mother tongue. "I just didn't want them to be different," she tells me.

My father-in-law Bill comes from what my family would have considered "real American" stock—English and Scotch-Irish. His mother was a young widow raising her son on a ranch in Panhandle, Texas, when

William Holden blew into town fresh from Kentucky and took a job on her ranch, then married her and fathered Bill.

This William Holden had been forced to leave Kentucky because he was riding around at night with a bunch of vigilantes burning barns full of tobacco. The family doesn't like to speculate about what else he was doing while riding around in the rural South in the early 1900s.

Bill and Lupe met in El Paso, where he was stationed during the war. While Bill went off to fight in the Pacific, Lupe lived at the Holden family ranch in Panhandle. A beautiful young Mexican woman living with the son of a former Kentucky vigilante. Nothing is simple. Nothing is obvious.

## Amy's Picture

My family left Eastern Europe because of the Russian draft, economics and pogroms. Both my parents are Jewish and both are from Brooklyn. The simplicity of their pairing ends there.

My father's family was well-off in Europe. They all had university degrees. His parents spoke English, Russian, German, Lithuanian and French, but not Yiddish. They considered Yiddish a peasant language. Within ten years of their arrival in this country, their education and ability to assimilate helped them move from the Lower East Side to a nice neighborhood in Brooklyn. They made artificial flowers and dealt in real estate, just as they had done in Europe. They were left-leaning in their politics. Trotsky supposedly stayed at my grandmother's house in Brooklyn.

My mother's family, on the other hand, spoke only Yiddish until they came to the United States. They were poor in Europe, struggled here all their lives and found some security. The Depression hit hard, and poverty hurt their spirits but did not narrow their vision.

### Complex Portrait

My family's portrait is not simple, and I cannot answer simple questions or accept simple titles. We represent the freedom of America—to marry whom you please and be whom you please. My grandparents dropped their Yiddish and their culture to "be American." My husband Richard's grandfather left Kentucky and became a respectable rancher. On both sides, my family travelled to new lands and transformed themselves into new people.

New is never really new. Underneath the new language and the new clothes, the new ways of eating and the new styles of expression, the past lurks: the fear of poverty and displacement, of being seen as different, of being scorned; or of someone stealing what is yours, of someone questioning your right to exist. Values and world views are passed on even as old styles of living die.

I took my mother's move a step further and married a non-Jew. And Richard married a woman who, unlike his mother, wants her children to "be different" and to know who they are. All of who they are.

Richard and I, like our ancestors, have also headed West. In California we live far from our families but not from our pasts. Unlike our forebears, I don't believe you can leave who you are behind and become someone else.

To our own family I bring my cultural sensitivities, more European and urban, and my husband brings his, more—I like to say—expansive and "American." We struggle with these differences. I have a narrower view of the world, his is wider. We shape and form our own traditions, each bringing our own seeds and soil.

Because I grew up feeling I lived half in the Gentile world and half in the Jewish world, my boys are being raised in a Jewish world—or as much of one as is possible in central California. We belong to a temple and observe the Jewish holidays. We have Shabbat. But on those holidays, we may have chili, beans and tortillas, instead of chicken soup.

We have chosen to be a Jewish family but within that choice we remain the tapestry we are. We have Southwestern and Mexican art in our home and we have mezuzahs on the doorposts. We light a chanukiah and we eat posole stew for Christmas Eve. We listen to mariachi music, country western, klezmer and classical. We read I.B. Singer and cowboy poems.

Ask my boys who they are and they will tell you they are Jewish and also Mexican and "from Texas." The complexity is interesting, not confusing, to them.

Humans love to simplify. Simplifying complexity gives us a sense of security. Nature, though, loves complexity. Nature is healthy with lots of differences that offer the opportunity to form lots of combinations. The same can be said for humans. ■

## Letters to the Editor

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Thank you for your order.

I found the August/September 1996 edition of Dovetail to be a fat "red herring." The issue to be addressed is not setting up guidelines for joint worship services which can happen only on a few civil holidays such as Thanksgiving and Memorial Day, but rather to restructure partisan liturgies to be more inclusive of Christians sharing worship with Jews in synagogues and vice versa.

I can't speak of what is happening in the Christian camp, but with the new-found "back to Torah" orientation of Reform temples, I fear this enterprise may also be doomed to failure. Lamentably, only the Unitarian Universalists have a grip on this issue—basically since they fall for just about everything, and stand for practically nothing.

*Rabbi Steve Mason  
West Hartford, Connecticut*

*[Editor's note: Dovetail does not share this opinion of Unitarian Universalism.]*

Upon reading "Holiday Harmony" in the December 1995 issue of Bride's magazine (Dovetail is mentioned), I thought of an inter-faith couple I know. Each December, they erect a "holiday tree," a beautiful pine decorated with blue and white lights, small dreidels, miniature menorahs, and things of that sort. The whole thing is crowned with a shining, silvery Star of David.

I thought this compromise both festive and charming, and perhaps some of your subscribers might wish to try it this December.

*Andrea Reed  
Winnipeg, Manitoba, Canada*

*[Editor's note: In addition to the suggestion above, we'd like to offer the following creative idea for solving the "tree issue."]*

When my husband and I were first married, we kept our apartment neutral during the holidays. When my son was born and we moved into our first house, we thought it was important to bring both of our traditions into our home. But as a Jew who never had a tree growing up, I felt uncomfortable having one now. My Catholic husband wanted to continue the traditions that he enjoyed as a child. Every December, the question led to a great debate, until we found our own solution, the "Memory Tree."

Creating a memory tree is easy, a lot of fun, and something your whole family can do together, throughout the year. Instead of decorating your tree with the usual ornaments and tinsel, you decorate it with keepsakes and souvenirs that you save throughout the year. We hang special photos, wedding invitations, birth announcements, birthday cards, my son's art projects, report cards, postcards from our vacations, and letters from our friends. You can hang anything on the tree that represents a special family memory from the past year.

My son takes such delight in seeing things he made displayed on the tree that he now keeps an envelope in his desk and saves things that are important to him in it. He looks forward to hanging his keepsakes on the tree in December. Family and friends who visit during the holidays enjoy reminiscing when they see the tree. Some even bring things to add to the tree.

We like to take the tree down on New Year's Eve. It gives our family time to spend together, talking about the past year and what we have to look forward to in our future, before we go our separate ways that night.

*Michelle Mueller  
Stony Point, New York*

# Bulletin Board:

## Interfaith Support Around the Nation

*To be listed as a contact person for a new or existing group, send your information to **Dovetail**. We'll be happy to include it here in an upcoming issue.*

**PLEASE NOTE: *Dovetail* does not interview or endorse any entry listed here.**

### Amherst, Massachusetts\*

Two existing local interfaith groups.  
Contact: Janet Lehan Bloom  
(413) 253-3685

### Boston, Massachusetts\*

Developing a network of interfaith families.  
Contact: Adina Davidson and Joel Nitzberg  
(617) 776-3235

### New Haven, Connecticut\*

Existing interfaith group.  
Contact: Christina Giebisch-Mohrer  
(203) 287-9110

### Hasbrouck Heights, New Jersey

Temple Beth Elohim  
Congregation welcomes Jews and non-Jews.  
Contact: Rabbi Fredric S. Dworkin  
(201) 744-3304

### New York, New York

Temple of Universal Judaism  
Participation is open to all.  
Contact: Rabbi Roy A. Rosenberg  
(212) 535-0187

### Rockland County, New York\*

Interested in forming an interfaith group.  
Contact: Eric and Elizabeth Kohlmeier  
(914) 639-9380

### Long Island, New York

Long Island Havurah (Fellowship)  
for Humanistic Judaism  
Existing group stresses intercultural strengths.  
Contact: Leonard Cherlin  
(516) 889-8337

### Capital District Area, New York\*

Interested in either joining an existing group or forming a new group.  
Contact: John and Debbie Toy  
(518) 439-3451

\* denotes a group not sponsored by a religious institution.

### Woodstock, New York

Support Group for People in  
Interfaith Relationships  
Contact: Rabbi Jonathan Kliger  
(914) 679-7886 (h); (914) 246-0265 (w)

### Rochester, New York

Interfaith Connection  
Contact: Michele Ruda Leve, C.S.W.  
(716) 461-0110, ext. 116

### South Jersey/Philadelphia\*

Bifaithful Families & Children Network  
Contact: Miriam Gilbert, (609) 753-1173

### Philadelphia Area

Jewish Converts & Interfaith Network  
Support groups for grandparents, parents,  
interfaith couples, converts and children.  
Contact: Lena Romanoff, Director  
(610) 664-8112

### Greater Washington, DC, Area\*

Interfaith Families Project  
Existing interfaith group.  
Contact: Laura Steinberg  
(301) 589-9280

### Greater Washington, DC, Area

Bethesda Jewish Congregation  
Jewish congregation welcomes interfaith families.  
Contact: Maran Beth Ostchega, Exec. Director  
(301) 469-8636

### Rockville, Maryland

Interfaith Outreach Program,  
JCC of Greater Washington, DC  
Introduces interfaith families to Jewish life.  
Contact: Lisa Shapero, Director  
(301) 881-0100, ext. 6782

### Baltimore, Maryland

Jewish Outreach Network Programs  
Groups, workshops and counseling for  
interfaith families, parents, and converts.  
Contact: Beth Land Hecht, Director  
(410) 466-9200, ext. 381

### Raleigh, North Carolina\*

Interested in starting/joining a support group.  
Contact: Colleen Gross  
(919) 571-1773

### Atlanta, Georgia\*

Interested in starting a support group.  
Contact: Mitch Wynn and Yvonne Evans  
(404) 495-1474

### Memphis, Tennessee\*

Newly-formed interfaith group.  
Contact: Jan and David Kaplan  
(901) 767-4267

### Louisville, Kentucky\*

Interested in forming an interfaith group.  
Contact: Carolyn Humphrey & Fred Gross  
(502) 423-8583

### Columbus, Ohio

Gateways: The Jewish Interfaith Connection  
Groups and programs for grandparents,  
parents, interfaith couples and families.  
Contact: Jan Buchler, Project Director  
(614) 231-2731

### Cincinnati, Ohio\*

Interested in joining an interfaith group.  
Contact: Christine M. Segal  
(513) 489-8840, ext. 276 (day)  
(513) 793-2866 (evening)

### Southeast Michigan

Interested in forming an interfaith group.  
Contact: Rabbi Richard A. Weiss  
(810) 932-1941

### Milwaukee, Wisconsin

Interfaith Connection  
Existing interfaith group.  
Contact: Joyce Gutzke, Interfaith Coordinator  
(414) 967-8218

### Minneapolis, Minnesota\*

Twin Cities Support Group  
Existing interfaith group.  
Contact: Chris Simon & Judy Sharken Simon  
(612) 724-8947

### Chicago, Illinois\*

Jewish-Catholic Couples Dialogue Group  
Existing interfaith group.  
Contact: Patty and David Kovacs  
(312) 275-5689, or  
Abbe and Dan Josephs, (708) 963-4565

### New Orleans, Louisiana

Interfaith Friendship Group  
Forming a new group.  
Contact: Sue Daube, Jewish Family Service  
(504) 524-8475

### Tulsa, Oklahoma\*

Newly-formed group for families interested  
in celebrating both religions.  
Contact: Sally Nahmias  
(918) 298-5959

### Denver, Colorado\*

Interested in forming an interfaith group.  
Contact: Karen McCarthy and Dan Kowal  
(303) 439-7750

### San Francisco Bay Area, California\*

Existing interfaith group.  
Contact: Alicia Torre  
(415) 591-9434

### San Francisco Bay Area, California

Interfaith Connection  
Groups for interfaith couples.  
Contact: Rosanne Levitt, Director  
(415) 292-1252

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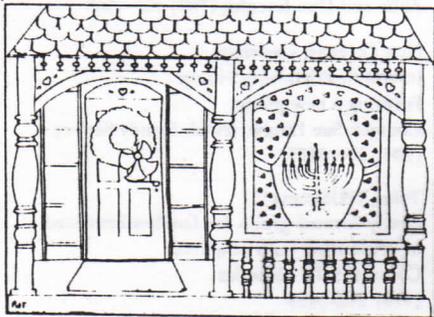
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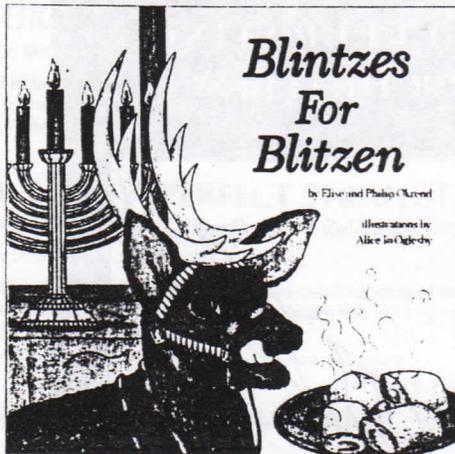
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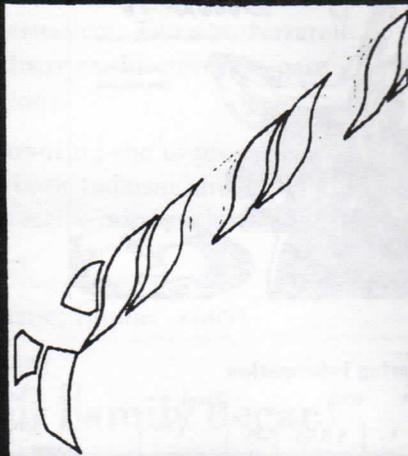
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### About the Authors

Stanley Ned Rosenbaum, PhD, is Professor of Religion and Classics, and Coordinator of the Judaic Studies Program, at Dickinson College in Carlisle, PA. His publications include *Amos of Israel* and a number of articles in scholarly and popular publications. He is a leader of the local Jewish community. He also frequently gives lectures, workshops, and invocations at Christian and ecumenical events.

Mary Helène Pottker Rosenbaum has been published in a number of religious and secular magazines and newspapers. An active member of St. Patrick Catholic Church, where she has been a lector for twenty years, she has also served as Executive Director for Congregation Beth Tikva and lectured and talked at numerous Protestant churches.

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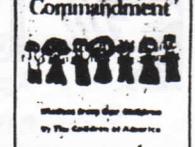
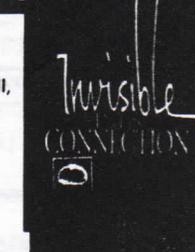
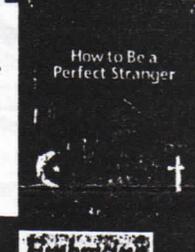
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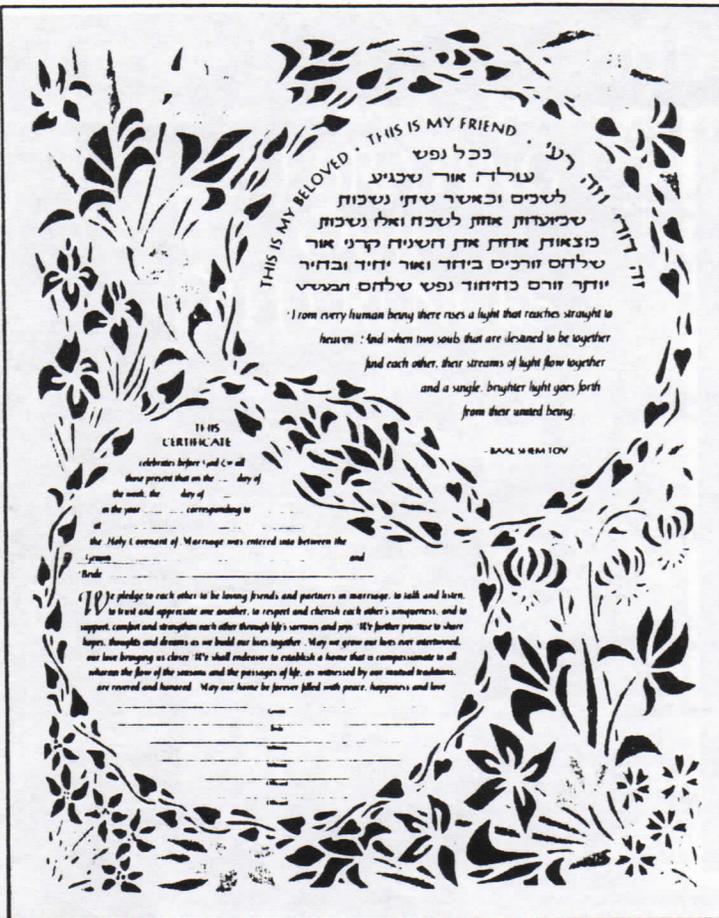
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