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"Do You See What I See?"

Nancy Vernon Kelly¹

Do you see what I see? I remember this question from a Christmas song I learned long ago when I was a child.² "Do you see what I see?" Now, as a grandmother, I find myself wondering about the notion that one can ever see what another sees, especially when we are people with distinct life experiences, cultures, and faiths. What an intriguing question!

I also find myself drawn to the question "Do I see what you see?" One interfaith relationship with a Jewish friend came to an end when I shared a book I was reading about forgiveness and the Holocaust. Right away, I knew I'd struck a sour chord and never found a way to re-engage a relationship that went back to junior high school. Did I see what my friend saw? No. I was looking through another lens. Her vision interrupted mine.

Years ago, while working with refugees from El Salvador, I was walking into a downtown church to give a presentation with my friend Maria Portillo. Maria came to Canada with her family because of the violence, fear, and persecution of war that interrupted their lives, hopes, and dreams.

Seemingly out of the blue, Maria said to me, "Nancy, I still can't understand why you have a job working with refugees, and I am a refugee telling my story over and over again, but I don't have a job." Whew! Maria interrupted my vision. I saw myself putting my faith into action; Maria saw my white North American privilege and named it. Ever since that encounter, I've been skeptical of my ability to see what someone else sees. In this case, I did not see through Maria's eyes and was blindsided by her take on the situation.

Does Jesus see what the Syrophenician woman sees in the story told in the Gospel of Mark?³ Does the Syrophenician woman see what Jesus sees? I can't answer that question, but I can affirm that healing comes as a result of the caustic exchange that takes place between the Jewish man Jesus and the unnamed Gentile woman.

The woman interrupts more than a dinner party when she knocks on the door of a home where Jesus is visiting. When the desperate mother pleads with Jesus to heal her daughter of a demon, Jesus responds with an insolent barb. He says, "Let the children be fed first, for it is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs." He compares the Syrophenician mother and daughter to the little dogs that hang out under the dinner table and eat the crumbs that fall to the floor. How I wish that Jesus hadn't said that! The woman fires a spunky comeback line: "Yes, Lord; yet even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs." When the woman interrupts Jesus' insider perspective, he extends long-distance healing to her little daughter.

How like the complexity of the relationships we people of different faiths and no faith experience with one another – muddy, risky, and filled with potential! What do we see when we see one another? When I kept vigil with Muslim neighbours after the attack in a Quebec City mosque in 2017, did I see what Muslim friends saw? When I attended a synagogue

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² Noël Regney (lyrics) and Gloria Shayne Baker (music), "Do You Hear What I Hear?" (1962).

³ Mark 7:24–30.

service and danced in a circle while singing “Miriam’s Song”, did I see what Jewish friends saw? When I spent an evening listening to Muslim women talk passionately about their experience of wearing the hijab, what did I see? What didn’t I see?

Recently, an interfaith encounter deepened my inquiry. The encounter wasn’t in the familiar context of a personal relationship cultivated in community. It didn’t take place at a committee meeting, forum, or vigil. The encounter was mediated; I was watching an episode of the medical television drama *Grey’s Anatomy*.

The Season 14 episode “You Really Got a Hold on Me” portrays an interfaith encounter at Grey-Sloan Memorial Hospital. One of the characters, Dr. Dahlia Qadri (played by Sophia Taylor Ali), is a Muslim intern working with Dr. Owen Hunt (played by Kevin McKidd), Dr. Hunt is the head of trauma surgery and chief of surgery. Both doctors are attending a young boy named Tyler who has experienced life-threatening injuries in an accident. At the beginning of the scene, Dr. Hunt is clearly the teaching doctor. He quizzes his intern about CT findings. She asserts the need to rule out injuries that would require emergency surgery.

While the senior doctor is off screen briefly, Dr. Qadri is alone with Tyler. When he wakes up on the gurney, he pulls a shard of metal out of his thigh and starts hemorrhaging. Dr. Qadri is standing at Tyler’s bedside and acts quickly. She pulls her hijab off her head and wraps it around Tyler’s thigh as a life-saving tourniquet.

Medically speaking, and also speaking as a colleague, Dr. Hunt expresses awe when he returns to the bedside. Dr. Qadri has saved Tyler’s life in a way he himself could not have offered or foreseen. Her vantage point has interrupted his.

Spiritually speaking, Dr. Qadri affirms her faith. She says her hijab is a symbol of her faith, and her faith is about service and compassion. Dr. Qadri is the healer and also the teacher. Her spontaneous action and the image of her blood-soaked hijab invite people of all faiths and no faith to consider faith in action from the vantage point of a Muslim woman, in her words, through her heart. Viewers also have the chance to witness interfaith mutuality when the senior doctor washes the blood out of Dr. Qadri’s hijab and returns the anointed scarf to wear as a sign of her faith as she continues to do her healing work in the hospital.

The television scene described above might be shown in groups to generate discussion about point of view. It invites viewers to consider the potential of interfaith encounters and to embrace the challenges, risks, surprises, and life-giving power of such encounters as we live and work together in community and interrupt one another’s points of view.

I remain cautious about assuming that we can ever see through the eyes of another. Yet, even when faith experiences and practices are divergent, interfaith relationships and collective action can serve to interrupt what we see (or think we see) and give us the chance to try on one another’s perspectives, albeit imperfectly. Sometimes, lightning bolts reveal jarring truths. More often than we like to admit, we might find ourselves eating our words or somebody else’s. Occasionally, we might take on unexpected roles. The teacher becomes the student. The servant becomes the one who is served.

Once in a while, healing and hope result, and we catch a glimpse of what it looks like for people with distinct points of view to stand together on holy, life-giving ground.