

# ***The Power of Relationships and Personal Story in Transforming Community***

## **By Aziza Hasan**

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By 2043, the United States will be a majority-minority country.<sup>1</sup> This shift may have significant implications for our society; a key question becomes how are we preparing for this major shift? When Lina Akkad, a young Muslim professional joined *NewGround*, a year-long intensive program that models and instills pluralism among Los Angeles Muslims and Jews, she walked in thinking she was open-minded. However, during the course of the fellowship she realized how much ‘open-mindedness’ she still needed to cultivate. In fact, many of those who come into the *NewGround* experience are surprised to find themselves struggling with practicing pluralism. Though one may think of oneself as open-minded, the situation is different when theory shifts to practice. In *NewGround’s* case, a Sunni Muslim prays next to Shia, Ismaili, or Ahmaddiya Muslims; a Modern Orthodox Jew worships side by side with Reform, Conservative, Reconstructionist and Humanist Jews. Community issues relating to gender, identity, and values unleash uncomfortable conversations typically taboo in many circles. In the process of understanding the ‘other,’ participants become aware of their own anxiety and fears; they become aware of the range of opinions within their own ‘community.’ Thus, the practice of pluralism re-constructs the perception of the ‘other,’ which builds character and, ultimately, communities.

“That is not true. At least not in the mainstream of the 99% of Muslims,” reverberated the voice of a male Muslim participant of *NewGround*. “Women do not lead prayer,” he continued. This was in response to a female peer explaining that women lead prayer regularly in her community. The intensity of the conversation picked up as one fellow after the other shared her/his perspective on the subject-- while a Muslim and Jewish facilitator team helped diffuse the conversation with carefully crafted questions. “What I find interesting, is that many of the same arguments you are using are used in the Jewish community as well,” chimed in one of the Jewish professionals. And like that, the tension started to evaporate. The power of being seen and an image in another community helping demonstrate how normal the conversation was and is. During the first weekend residential retreat as part of the *NewGround: A Muslim Jewish Partnership for Change’s* year-long program for professionals, the Muslims are tasked with leading an authentic Muslim prayer and the Jews are asked to lead a Shabbat prayer service. Each group helping the other experience the tradition in a way that is both authentic, meaningful and informative. When the fellows begin planning for their assignment, it initially seems easy and straightforward yet soon becomes complicated. Challenges arise when participants realize how important their own vision is for how the tradition should be carried out. Some insisting that a religious leader be brought in to lead the experience while others bring in family traditions

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<sup>1</sup> “America Will Become Majority Minority in 2043--But in Many Ways That New America Has Already Arrived,” *PRI*, October 03, 2014, accessed March 31, 2015, <http://www.pri.org/stories/2014-10-03/america-will-become-majority-minority-2043-many-ways-new-america-has-already>.

and interpretations behind specific rituals. Each person wanting to perform the prayer the 'right' way. Eventually the 10 Jews and 10 Muslims figure it out and each present a piece of the tradition that enriches their own life. During the question and answer portion, fellows dive deeper into vulnerability. One year, a Muslim fellow finally found the courage to say that the way the Muslim group decided to perform the prayer was not at all the way he experiences it in his own family as an Ismaili Muslim. This allowed for the Shia individuals in the group to speak to the differences of their own tradition from the majority Sunni population among the fellows. Likewise, humanist Jews find meaningful ways to share Shabbat, while others are so overwhelmed with emotion that they opt to do their Shabbat prayers separately before the Shabbat experience so that they can have an intimate connection with the Divine prior to sharing the Almighty with others.

Each year, *NewGround* brings together 20 Muslim and Jewish professionals and 20 high school students for year-long programs to learn alongside one another, experience the beauty and challenges of pluralism, and build something to benefit the larger community of Muslims and Jews. *NewGround's* model dives deep into a safe space where people trust in a process that allows them to be vulnerable both in their own community and with the other. It is intensive and requires a great deal of structure, with skilled facilitators that promote dialogue during weekend retreats that take participants away from their everyday lives. Though remarkably successful, a few years ago, the leadership of *NewGround* had to make a decision about whether to keep the *NewGround* experience a small safe space or admit as many people as possible. This took place after the team was confronted with the realization that a heavily guarded safe space may liberate the participants in the room. And yet, for every 100 people who express interest in the program, 80 must be turned away; shut out from an experience that they would love to pursue. It was a problem that spoke to the very core of the pluralistic focus of the organization. *NewGround* was pushing away willing individuals eager to take part in a different type of conversation. So the leadership of *NewGround* expanded the circle by offering public events that now gather hundreds of Muslims and Jews for opportunities to connect, learn from, and alongside each other.

### **So how to ensure a respectful exchange of ideas?**

Though the events look simple, a great deal of intense thought is put into constructing them. A team of change-makers experienced in small and large group convenings discuss each activity and the words that frame it. The strength of the program heavily relies on the team's ability to engage through a pluralistic process that frames a meaningful event that builds relationships on a larger scale with many more people in the room. This intense effort is guided by the phrase '**interfaith not done well, can do harm.**' It is a phrase that was born out of the failures of interfaith events and projects that, though well-intentioned, led people to walk away resentful of the experience. This is not to say that the *NewGround* process makes people happy all the time--approaching conflict as natural and inevitable yet not intractable is a difficult concept. Individuals are bound to hear things that they do not like. However, when they are ready, they know where to find their friends and leverage relationships in order to finally undertake a difficult conversation.

That is why, **empowering people with the tools to have difficult conversations** and commit to working through conflict is so important. For example, participants are taught the practice of intentional listening, which stresses individuals to remain present when it is easier to stop hearing perspectives that trigger strong emotions, in order to gain one of the important skills necessary for engaging in constructive pluralism. Yet, how often is pluralism, an American value, modeled in a constructive way? How often do we, as a community, demonstrate what it actually looks like to embrace diversity and learn side by side? A high school student participating in the *NewGround* program recently asked for a debate-style format where the students in the program could argue facts. And yet, 'date dumps' are just that: an opportunity to off-load one 'fact' about the other. Instead, *NewGround's* style of practicing pluralism is an opportunity for individuals to not necessarily remember facts, but remember the strong emotions that the exchange evoked--be it anger, defeat, or frustration.<sup>2</sup> Storytelling is an effective and thoughtful approach to dialogue. It is an approach that *NewGround* has utilized to connect and transform hearts and minds. During one of *Newground's* weekend-long overnight retreats on Israel-Palestine, a Muslim Palestinian fellow took a stand to say that he had the most at stake to be part of a group like *NewGround*. Instantly, many of the fellows in the room took in large breaths as if timed in unison. The Jewish facilitator tried to reframe his comments but he kept insisting his stake was larger than anyone else's. Then the Muslim Palestinian facilitator stepped in and reframed the conversation asking him if he could agree that "he had a lot at stake to be part of the discussion." He agreed. This very example being one of the important reasons why *NewGround* uses trained facilitator teams consisting of one Muslim and one Jew. Acting as a pair, the facilitators may tag team, listen for cultural undertones and utilize their similarities with participants to help move the conversations into constructive space. The Muslim Palestinian fellow was then prompted to share his personal story and experience of how his life was impacted by Israeli policies and actions. It was a string of stories of loss, heart-break and challenge. After fellows took in his story, those who were visually triggered were prompted by the facilitators to share their personal stories of how they have been affected. One of the Jewish fellows responding had narrowly escaped a suicide bombing at a university cafeteria in Israel. Her story was also filled with moving emotion and pain. These narratives and others were shared in a space that by no means resolved the conflict. However, what it did do, was open up a vulnerable space where a common humanity could be seen. A humanity for people who could see across the divide of conflict and start to see the human beings across from them.

Sometimes the luxury of time--whether to do a year-long fellowship or invite people over to dinner--is not available. In light of this reality, *NewGround* organizes **large-scale public events for hundreds of people**, where individuals connect through National Public Radio (NPR) MOTH-style storytelling by answering specific guided questions. *NewGround* invests in amplifying individual stories that move hearts and minds because each story allows each person in the audience to confront their own fears with courage. Individuals receive questions that come from a place of curiosity and are encouraged to ask questions when they feel uncomfortable. This instantly moves dialogue into a vulnerable place. More

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<sup>2</sup> Peter Guber, *Telling to Win* (New York: Crown Business, 2011), 16.

importantly, the parameters of a safe space, which require a timed exchange that solicits questions that come from a place of curiosity, enable individuals to connect quickly and have a meaningful dialogue that gives each person a platform to feel respected and heard. Without these, voices will be marginalized, muted, and isolated.

Fellowship: structured private safe space for 20 individuals with a Muslim and Jewish **facilitator who actively frame and reframe** the conversation throughout the course of the dialogue. Each intra group has an opportunity to challenge each other, as well as the other faith community while still adhering to community ground rules. From the outset, *NewGround* actively recruits individuals with diverse backgrounds -- including various religious, ethnic, gender identity, and sexual orientations -- ranging from Jews of Modern Orthodox, Reconstructionist, Conservative, Reform or Humanist traditions; Muslims who are Sunni, Ismaili, Shia, culturally Muslim, or religiously conservative from many different ethnic backgrounds, including but not limited to people of Palestinian, Lebanese, African American, and South Asian descent, and individuals identifying as part of the Lesbian, Gay and Transgender communities. The *NewGround* fellows build friendships and relationships first as they explore topics of Judaism, Islam, hate, conflict resolution, and Israel-Palestine. These relationships culminate into individual Muslim-Jewish bridge-building projects that fellows complete in their respective communities.

In addition to the intimate Fellowship and high school leadership programs, *NewGround* convenes public events that bring in attendees as participants and not attendees--each actively engaged and connecting with someone new. All have targeted questions to answer OR are given an explicit goal or purpose. One of *NewGround's* largest popular public events that brings together hundreds of people each year is Spotlight, during which 26 organizations across LA serve as co-sponsors and bring out their constituents. This model of relationship building through storytelling offers a personal connection before entering into religious discussions. It helps individuals see the humanity in each other and even share the stories that deeply affect them with their friends online by posting the stories uploaded on *NewGround's* YouTube channel after the event and on their social media profiles. The story-telling event connects people and organizations who would not otherwise engage one another and empowers individuals with relationships and tools to interact with diversity in a way that builds community. This enables individuals in community to problem-solve and take greater ownership over the challenges they face. The foundation of our work is a respectful pluralism that builds on the strengths of diversity. Greater communication and connection builds healthy and resilient communities, which gives people empowered access to resources that will help them overcome the challenges they face and thus become proactive contributing members who strengthen community in diversity.

A follow-up evaluation of the program showed that 72% of participants improved their ability to engage with people from other religious groups while 91% of participants reported to have improved their leadership abilities as a result of *NewGround's* program. These findings provide insight into the efficacy of *NewGround's* model; thus, supporting the continuation and growth of *NewGround's* efforts to empower Jewish and Muslim change-makers through a professional fellowship, high school leadership council, and public

programming. Furthermore, *NewGround* alumni have initiated extraordinary projects and organizations as a result of their experience with *NewGround*. For example, Diane Vanette and Sajid Mohamedy both met at *NewGround*'s professional fellowship and decided to create "The Muslim and Jewish Organized Relief (MAJOR) Fund," which unites Muslims and Jews to assist communities with clean water, education, and healthcare. Tova Douglas, a recent graduate of the *NewGround* Professional Fellowship, captures the quintessence of *NewGround*'s mission in her 2014 Iftar Speech, "Before *NewGround*, I knew who I was. I was a liberal, feminist, humanist, social justice seeker, open minded to all faiths and cultures except that I wasn't [...] I never, ever truly embraced the opportunity to challenge my perception of myself and engage wholeheartedly with the other. I lived in my cozy box and was comfortable [...] *NewGround* challenged me to shift my thinking and begin to disassemble the box..."<sup>3</sup>

Authenticity, as challenging as it may be, is the bedrock of any relationship. Placing relationships before politics is a critical component of resilient relationships. Moreover, open communication--although, at times difficult and tense--is crucial to bringing Muslim and Jews to the conversation table when conflicts occur. Thus, it is imperative to help give people the tools to ensure they are adequately articulating their concerns before such conflicts occur because it is only a matter of time before it does occur. Thus, having the tools to work through conflict in an honest and authentic way will be the true measure of success.

Authentic expression goes hand in hand with the respect for self-definition. Rather than projecting one's own definition of what the other group 'ought to be, think or feel,' the onus falls back on the person who is uncomfortable with the other person's definition. This process can enable both individuals to wrestle through tension and work to truly hear what their peer is trying to say.

Facing conflict areas head-on by exploring issues of gender, identity, racism and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict give people the ability to voice their concerns without having an unspoken elephant in the room. By confronting the elephant directly, its ability to undermine the relationship becomes limited. This allows the relationships to focus on the local instead of the international-- because while the international is important and of critical concern, the greatest impact may be made on relationships in the United States.

## **Possibilities**

The possibilities of pluralism are infinite. The very fabric of diversity has the ability to make a community thrive. Los Angeles is a city of coalitions. When one group does not know how to work respectfully alongside others, they are at a significant disadvantage. Are we ready to be a minority-majority country? Is the nation prepared to be fruitful and manage its diverse populations effectively? There is no alternative. Progress, or what? The

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<sup>3</sup> "NewGround Change-Maker Reflection: Tova Leibovic Douglas '14," last modified July 11, 2014, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1sHZnfPaYZo>.

role of pluralism is one of rising significance. The ability to cooperate well with other groups will not only define us as people, but define our ability to pass laws, build infrastructure, and problem-solve as a nation. Thus, the role of pluralism is crucial to the success of today's and tomorrow's world.

Empowering minority groups to adequately gain equal access to programs and resources is a critical part of pluralism. Healthy and resilient communities need to provide all community members with access to resources and programs that build communal and individual knowledge of the best and most effective ways to create desired change.

Jews and Muslims who have completed the *NewGround* program report a deeper connection to their own faith as a result of completing the fellowship. Take *NewGround* alumna Rachel Gandin for example. Rachel joined *NewGround* to build relationships with Arabs, however, during her fellowship, she realized that few Muslims are Arab. In her testimony of her experience, she explained that "after years of immersing myself in Arab and Muslim culture, I had put my relationship to Judaism on the back burner. *NewGround* allowed me to re-engage while exploring it with Muslims and Jews of differing beliefs. The safe space allowed me to bridge my two separate lives without having to defend either one."<sup>4</sup>

*NewGround* alumni are 150+ strong and have developed a number of different successful projects, examples including the New Horizon Islamic School and Sinai Akiba Day School Exchange Program, The Muslim and Jewish Organized Relief (MAJOR) Fund, various facilitated community conversations around racial tensions among youth in public schools following the Trayvon Martin tragedy, among many more. *NewGround's* success is in the diversity of its supporters and programs that continue beyond the fellowship: A board of directors who transitioned it from the two organizations, the Progressive Jewish Alliance and the Muslim Public Affairs Council, who birthed it to its own independent entity, 50+ organizations who support its public programs, and religious and lay leaders across the city who support the program and help us recruit a diverse body of applicants. The network will continue beyond the initial founding team. John Maxwell in the *360 Degree Leader*, defines this as a true mark of success.<sup>5</sup>

## **Limits of pluralism**

At times, plurality can seem to be nonexistent. In fact, certain academics argue that plurality is more of an ideal that audaciously tosses aside the political, economical, and social realities that are marred by inequality and inequity. Perhaps Cornel West says it best, "If we don't learn with one another, then how can we learn to live with one another?" So, for some, it's clear: plurality is a myth. This is a particularly salient feeling in LA where one neighborhood can feature million dollar houses while adjacent neighborhoods face abject poverty.

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<sup>4</sup> "Testimonial: Rachel Gandin," last modified March 11, 2015, <http://mjnewground.org/stories/>.

<sup>5</sup> John Maxwell, *The 360 Degree Leader: Developing Your Influence From Anywhere in The Organization Workbook* (Nashville: Nelson Impact, 2006), 17.

Thus, as important as pluralism is, turning a blind eye to its limitations will only lead to frustration. Consensus-building among diverse groups of people can be like herding cats -- essential and yet exhausting to the point of frustration. The process itself will slow down an already sluggish system, making change seem monumental. It is a sentiment that *NewGround* sometimes feels and experiences in communities, which is why we engage youth change-makers. Young people have the potential and passion to make change--they have not become as jaded to social, political, and economic realities that may otherwise discourage older individuals. This is why investing in the training of leaders--particularly young leaders--across industries in the critical skills of problem-solving, storytelling, self expression and access to opportunity will be a critical part of our futures.

### **Flashpoints where pluralism seems unlikely**

Social media is an important tool that has great potential to bring out the best and the worst in people. Closed groups where people can bounce ideas off each other are great places for the exchange of ideas so long as there are explicit ground rules and moderators who enforce them. After the Chapel Hill murders, the family of the victims created a Facebook page titled, "Our Three Winners," that spread like wild fire. With hundreds of thousands of followers within one week's time, this page is a great example of how social media has a constructive role to play in an awful situation. And yet, when people strongly disagree on social media platforms, many times they respond immediately without thinking through their response or truly hearing what the other person has to say. That is why it is imperative to hold a guided forum where people can exchange ideas in a constructive way. However, once the conversation gets heated, there is no substitution for a face-to-face meeting, which has the potential to transform the conflict. Thus, it is imperative to allow members to participate on the condition that they commit to the community ground rules prior to joining.

### **Conclusion**

Giving people the opportunity to be heard, seen, and valued will lead to greater community involvement. The idea of maintaining the status quo instead of preparing for 2043 is short-sighted and counter-productive. We, the United States, will be majority minority but no one racial group will be a majority, we will be a nation of minorities soon and all of us will need the skills of pluralistic cooperation and community building across lines of difference to flourish. Instead, we must use our differences to build pluralistic communities, to empower one another and our communities to flourish so that when 2043 comes around, we all can feel proud.

### **Endnotes**

"America Will Become Majority Minority in 2043--But in Many Ways That New America Has Already Arrived." *PRI*. October 03, 2014. Accessed March 31, 2015.  
<http://www.pri.org/stories/2014-10-03/america-will-become-majority-minority-2043-many-ways-new-america-has-already>.

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**Aziza Hasan** has extensive experience in program management and coalition building. She has worked with diverse groups to deliver quality programming that developed the skills of its participants in the areas of civic engagement, advocacy, service learning, leadership, conflict transformation and diversity training. Aziza is a founding director of NewGround: A Muslim-Jewish Partnership for Change. An experienced mediator and conflict resolution practitioner, she has co-facilitated multiple fellowship cohorts. A successful model of genuine engagement, NewGround has been featured on Public Radio's "Speaking of Faith" with Krista Tippett, the United States Institute for Peace, Arabic Radio and Television, the LA Times, the Jewish Journal and InFocus.

She is experienced in Small Claims Court mediation, coaching individuals and leading groups in conflict resolution. Her two years of AmeriCorps service gave her hands-on experience in community organizing and group problem-solving. Aziza has appeared on CNN, ABCnews, Fox 11, LA City View 35, National Public Radio, and KCRW. Print media coverage of her work may be found in The Mennonite, AltMuslimah, The Wichita Eagle, The Newton-Kansan, The Halstead Independent, Hutchinson News and The Bethel College Collegian.