

Finding A Light in the Dark

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Rev. Julia Wright

The summer after I graduated college I worked as the Christian Coordinator for the Abrahamic Program for Young Adults, at the Chautauqua Institution (I frequently blame this one position for ruining the spacing on my resume). The goal of the Abrahamic Program for Young Adults (APYA) was to employ four coordinators from the three Abrahamic Faiths to live in community together and provide programming 4-5 nights a week for young adults to explore their faith traditions.

To start you might be wondering what are the Abrahamic Faiths? They are Judaism, Christianity, Islam. Each of these traditions see themselves as heirs to the tradition, teachings and God of Abraham (aka Abram, aka Avraham, aka Avram, aka Ibrahim, depending on your language preferences). The story can be found starting in Genesis chapter 11. Jews and Christians trace their lineage through Abraham's second son, Isaac, born of his wife Sarah, while Muslims trace their lineage through Abraham's first son, Ishmael, born of Sarah's handmaiden, Hagar.

Although all three faith traditions call God something different, we all worship the same divine being and believe it was this God that created the universe and is the one true God. The Jewish tradition believes that revelation ends with the end of the Hebrew Bible, known to Christians as the "Old Testament." They believe that Jesus existed as a historical figure and was a talented teacher but they do not believe he was the son of God. Christians, believe revelation and scripture ended with the New Testament, and believe that Jesus was both the son of God and was resurrected from the dead (Happy Easter by the way!). The Muslim tradition believes that revelation is completed with the revelation of the Quran to the Prophet Muhammad (may he rest in peace). In Islam Jesus is considered the greatest of the prophets, born of a virgin, who performed miracles, and raised into heaven, but they do not believe that he was the son of God, God incarnate or that he was crucified.

FUN RANDOM FACT: The Baha'i tradition, although not considered part of the Abrahamic tradition by most Jews, Christians, or Muslims, believes that God's revelation continues through modern history, unifying all people and all religions and was founded in 1863 by Baha'u'llah, and includes all the Jewish prophets and patriarchs (including Abraham), Jesus, Muhammad, and Buddha.

“Great Julia... this is fascinating... but what does it have to do with our spiritual practice today?”

So glad you asked! All of this is in fact a useful context to our spiritual practice today. Let's go back to that summer I worked with the APYA program. That summer I worked and lived with our Jewish Coordinator and $\frac{3}{5}$ Rabbi, Jeremy (He had completed 3 of 5 years of Rabbinic school at the time), Nur an Ismaili Muslim (look up the Ismaili tradition, the simplest but not quite accurate comparison is they're like Protestant Christians when compared to Greek Orthodox, or Reform Jews compared to Orthodox Jews), and Ali who was Iranian Muslim. Living with people of a similar age but very different cultural and spiritual backgrounds is immensely interesting, useful, and hard, and would be a wonderful discussion for these reflections another time. But mostly this paragraph is to introduce you to Ali. Ali and I sometimes butted heads, never about religion, frequently about cultural expectations of gender roles, and sometimes just because we both have big personalities, but it's Ali who taught me most that summer.

Ali had spent many summers back in Iran being trained to be a Muezzin, or the person who performs the Islamic call to prayer. It meant that he had a beautiful and powerful singing voice and spouted endless hadith (the oral traditions surrounding the Prophet Muhammad that provide daily guidance on how to live and practice Islam outside the Quran, think the wisdom literature or traditions ascribed to Biblical living that don't exist in the Bible). Islam is so focused on the magnitude and greatness of God that Ali's hadiths frequently applied to Jeremy and me as much as they did to Ali and Nur. It was Ali who taught me most about the

danger of creating God in our image (ascribing gender, race, hair color, i.e. any human likeness) rather than looking for God's image in everyone we see. It was Ali that made me think twice about eating while walking to lecture, because what if we walked by someone who didn't have food or was fasting? Were we making their life harder or ignoring their needs? Better to eat before you leave, or bring enough to share along your way.

But the hadith that stuck with me most, was about the moon. Every time we walked back to the dorms at night and the moon was out, Ali would stop and say "Look at the moon, it is like Jesus reflecting the light of Allah back to us in the darkness." or "Wait, look at the moon, Allah's love shines on us through Jesus even when we cannot feel the warmth of Allah's presence directly." and on, and on, every night the moon was out Ali would pause, look at it with awe, and remind us about the light God shares regardless of how dark it may seem. Sometimes that light was love, sometimes that light was hope, other times it was simple presence. Once when the moon was up during the day Ali paused again and said "See, even Allah can share the glory of the heavens with Jesus."

At first I found this frustrating, let's just get home... I'm tired and cold. I found it uncomfortable that our Muslim Coordinator was more comfortable talking about Jesus to a group of people than I was. Wasn't it my job to remind people of the love of God and Christ? But as the summer progressed, I changed how I saw the moon, it made me so happy, it gave me comfort, and it was worthy of noting, worthy of pausing with awe at its beauty. As Christians, ascribing or describing members of the Trinity as the Sun/moon/light/heat is [heresy](#), but that doesn't mean it's not a good teaching tool, and it doesn't mean Ali's lessons weren't useful. To this day when I see the moon I am reminded of God's love for us reflected through Christ's sacrifice. A light for us even in the darkness.

So our practice today, finding the light in the dark. Where is there light? Where is there hope? If everything feels dark, what is reflecting light back to you? No matter what you call God, no matter who you believe to be a prophet or messenger from that Divine something, how is the light of hope reaching you? Faith is about believing in something we cannot see, trusting that there is something bigger than

ourselves out there, watching, caring, loving, and hopefully protecting us. We look for signs, and symbols, tell stories, read scripture, and pray all in hopes of connecting with that Divine in some way.

Today I invite you to look for that light more intentionally. Make a list of the good things that happened this week, the people who loved you, the beautiful stirrings of spring outside, the things that made you feel better about life. Write them down, meditate on them, add a few more, draw one. Where is the Divine if not in those things?

Now don't forget about them. When you see them again, pause, look with awe at them, tell the person across the street to pause and look with you. Find your light, even if it's a reflection, and celebrate it.

And then listen to [this song](#) that was playing in my head while I wrote this whole thing.

A Prayer written by Baha'u'llah

*O my God! O my God!
Unite the hearts of Thy servants,
And reveal to them Thy great purpose.
May they follow Thy commandments,
and abide in Thy law.
Help them, O God, in their endeavor,
and grant them strength to serve Thee.
O God! Leave them not to themselves,
but guide their steps by the light of Thy knowledge
and cheer their hearts by Thy love.
Verily, Thou art their Helper and their Lord.*