

## Finding Golden Threads of Commonality: An Interfaith Dialogue Sharing Experiences During Troubled Times

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## **Finding Golden Threads of Commonality: An Interfaith Dialogue Sharing Experiences During Troubled Times**

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During the troubled times when the COVID-19 pandemic first changed all our lives in early 2020, the authors focused on the primal tasks of figuring out how to keep ourselves and our loved ones alive. Some of us immediately pivoted to living and working at home, while essential workers worked at crucial jobs to keep all of us alive. Those of us who lived through those early days of the pandemic and subsequent racial uprising learned many valuable lessons. This collaborative autoethnography provides insights and brings together the voices and musings of three scholars and educators whose foundational religious beliefs are grounded in different faiths: Buddhism, Christianity, and Hinduism. The authors reflected on ways our beliefs informed our ways of navigating several global crises, specifically, COVID-19 and racial strife in the US.

Using the conceptual framework of relational realms, this dialogue offers opportunities to recognize convergences in philosophical ideas, along with ways that divergent worldviews can provide a variety of ideas to support us in navigating life in the midst of pressing world issues. Although we have an abundance of data on the facts and figures of COVID-19, this article contributes to the literature by giving voice to three scholars/educators of differing faiths and how they experienced troubled times. We hope you will join our dialogue and

ponder the questions we discussed. The following questions guided our inquiry.

1. How have your foundational spiritual beliefs informed the way you navigated through the COVID-19 pandemic from 2020-2022?
2. What are ways your foundational spiritual beliefs shifted (if at all) during COVID-19?
3. How did your foundational spiritual beliefs support you in navigating the racial strife during the summer of 2020?

### **Relational Realms as a Conceptual Framework**

The concept of “relational realms” (Mokuria & Wandix-White, 2021; Wandix-White & Mokuria, 2023) provides an analytical tool and lens to explore some of the myriad ways people connect with one another. Further, this framework is rooted in the notion that all relationships “consist of internal and external ways of knowing and being that constantly and interactively release and retrieve energy which, when acknowledged and worked through, can result in authentic relationships” (Wandix-White & Mokuria, 2023, p. 89). Specifically, “relational realms can serve as bridges to create connections with others” (Wandix-White & Mokuria, 2023, p. 4) by exploring the many pathways we are linked, beyond superficial connections. This conceptual framework is well suited for an interfaith dialogue between scholars of differing faiths who together wanted to explore the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, along with other international crises, based on our unique foundational spiritual beliefs and/or practices.

To summarize relational realms as an overarching conceptual framework, it is important to recognize what the eight

relational realms are: (a) relational epistemology; (b) relational knowledge; (c) relational dissonance; (d) relational knowing; (e) relational cultural knowing; (f) relational value; (g) relational spiritual knowing; and (h) relational competence (Wandix-White & Mokuria, 2023). Each distinct realm focuses on one of the many ways people relate to each other and serves as a lens to more deeply understand relational phenomena in their varying forms.

Specifically, in this paper, we focus on the relational realm of “relational spiritual knowing,” which is defined as “the awareness of an inexplicable human connection between self and fellow human beings” (Wandix-White & Mokuria, 2023, p. 69). Further, relational spiritual knowing includes “reflecting upon, refreshing, and honoring the relationship we have with our own souls [that] is essential to improving and maintaining our health and well-being” (Wandix-White & Mokuria, 2023, p. 78). This research gave us, the researchers-participants, an opportunity to focus on and contemplate how our foundational spiritual faith informs the ways we engage with each other, others and ourselves, along with everything in the world around us, particularly in times of collective crises.

Much like educators who recognize the value of developing compassionate spirits in their work with children, nurses also seek to expand their capacities for compassion. In an article devoted to this topic for nurses, Willis and Leone-Sheehan (2019) define spirituality as “an innate feature of being human, whereby human beings experience meaning and purpose, awareness of a greater reality, and connection with others, nature, and/or to the infinite/sacred/divine, Source, or a Supreme Being, which may or may not involve religion” (p. 62). This definition of spirituality is well-suited to define the focus of our research.

A spiritual way of knowing is a central aspect of relational realms (Wandix-White & Mokuria, 2021) because “tending to the spiritual, which is where we most often find meaning and purpose, will help you to know thyself and welcome growth and transformation” (Wandix-White, 2023, p. 78). Within the realm of relational spiritual knowing, we are able to center our lives on our life’s mission and purpose, which holds the potential to anchor our lives from within while navigating the other relational realms.

Scholars, philosophers, and writers such as Anzaldúa (2002), Buber (1967), Palmer (2018), and Koegeler-Abdi (2013) recognize the profound significance of spirituality in relational knowing. This definitely does not mean one must be religious to navigate the relational realms. Spirituality transcends religious teaching or dogma and instead focuses on the human soul and internal peace that manifest in external appreciation for non-material qualities and experiences that provide meaning and purpose.

Grounded in the Quaker tradition, Parker Palmer is an activist, author, educator, and scholar who seeks to spread a universal message based on “a desire to ‘heal hearts’ not only of individuals but, metaphorically, of institutions, be they schools, hospitals, churches, colleges, and universities, even American democracy itself” (Walsh, 2017, p. xi). Palmer’s writings explore ways we link our spiritual realm to our lived experiences; he emphasizes how valuable it is for us to recognize and acknowledge the ways we connect with and honor our souls. This directly connects to relational spiritual knowing. Palmer (2018) explains, “It has everything to do with relationships that honor the soul, encourage the heart, inspire the mind, quicken the step, and heal the wounds we suffer along the way” (p. 63).

With intentionality, this research focuses on “honoring the soul” by providing a safe space to contemplate how the international crises experienced between 2020 and 2022, specifically COVID-19 and racial strife, affected us as scholars of different foundational faiths. This journey we chose to embark upon together gave us time—through dialogues and during the times between meetings—to contemplate these valuable questions and how COVID-19 impacted our spiritual realms as we faced these crises that affected all of us who lived through it in very different ways.

### Method

#### Collaborative Autoethnography as a Method

The method used in this research is Collaborative Autoethnography (CAE), which relies on the researchers to function simultaneously as participants who openly share their stories and recognize their dual roles as participants and researchers. Clifford Geertz considered auto-ethnographic research a “blurred genre” since “the boundaries between the social sciences and the humanities had become blurred” (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000, p. 15). Though Geertz may consider CAE to be a “blurred genre,” this approach can also be seen as a way to challenge a positivist notion in research that requires scholars to take a putatively objective stance, while gazing at and analyzing others. On the contrary, this form of inquiry is often considered a decolonizing approach to research because the research is turned inward on oneself, rather than exploring the ideas and perspectives of others (Tuck & Guishard, 2013). The qualitative research for this interfaith dialogue is well-suited for CAE, which also brought in other data sources common in qualitative studies, specifically

journal entries and reflections of dialogues with others (Clandinin & Connelly, 1994). Again, what is distinctive about CAE is that the researchers are the study’s participants.

The co-researchers for this article chose to “eschew the conventions of disinterested and impartial analysis, choosing instead to point their inquiries toward ‘acts of meaning’ associated with the lived processes of creating and managing identity, making sense of lived experiences, and communicating it to others” (Pensoneau-Conway et al., 2017, p. vii). By choosing to be vulnerable and openly share how our faiths helped us navigate the COVID-19 pandemic and the issues of racial strife during the summer of 2020, we felt CAE was the ideal methodology for our work. Since this research recounts the findings of our inter-faith dialogues, much of this article is written in the plural first person “we,” rather than “they.”

In simplest terms, Chang et al. (2013) explain that collaborative autoethnography (CAE) is “a qualitative research method in which researchers work in a community to collect their autobiographical materials and to analyze and interpret their data collectively to gain a meaningful understanding of sociocultural phenomena reflected in their autobiographical data” (p. 24). Another metaphor linked to CAE is that it can be likened to a musical ensemble (Chang et al., 2013) because of the possibility of the researchers/participants developing a synergy that can only happen when engaging with others, rather than working in isolation. A distinctive aspect of CAE is that “the method flattens power dynamics in the team because all the co-researchers are vulnerable in sharing their stories” (Lapadat, 2017, p. 599). For this reason, CAE can be considered a decolonized approach to research with regard to the “flattening” of the power dynamics of the process.

A key aspect of CAE is that it is a dialogical process because of the reciprocity in dialogues and how power is shared amongst those engaged in the dialogue. Paulo Freire (1970/2012) writes that “founding itself upon love, humility, and faith, dialogue becomes a horizontal relationship of which mutual trust between the dialoguers is the logical consequence” (p. 91). In utilizing CAE as a methodology, the kind of horizontal relationship Freire refers to naturally emerges, as participants, together grapple with the focus of the inquiry.

Finally, other key components of CAE are its emancipatory and de-colonizing aspects. Tuck and Guishard (2013) write that “an emancipatory conception of collaborative research insists on the shared activity of understanding and interpreting, within which the researcher instigates a process that does not belong to only her or him” (p. 47). The collaborative efforts of researcher-participants are far removed from an approach that makes claims on objectivity grounded in a positivist “truth.” The CAE process unapologetically centers on the unique truths of the participant-researchers, and in simplest terms, the “self-stories” generated through the dialogues of the participant-researchers serve as the data. This methodology was collaborative and iterative (Moore et al., 2013), as we each went back to earlier journals and reflected on our experiences while revisiting our thoughts during COVID-19. The kaleidoscope of memories and musings emerged in our dialogues—resulting in our individual and collective thoughts being woven together. In the course of our dialogues, unexpected golden threads of shared understandings emerged.

### **Brief Backgrounds of Participants’ Spiritual Influences**

#### **Vicki**

Vicki grew up in an observant Jewish family in Savannah, Georgia in the late 60s and early 70s. During her earliest elementary years, she and her classmates all stood and recited the Lord’s Prayer every day, only recently realizing it is a prayer from a Christian framework. Reflecting on her childhood, she remembers that “Every Friday night, we would have a Sabbath dinner. My mom would light candles and say a Hebrew prayer. My dad would say the prayers over the bread and wine, and this was every Friday night of my growing up.” Since her childhood was in the midst of the 60s and 70s, “when the world was on fire in terms of protests and questioning everything,” Vicki found herself questioning the faith of her family and being rebellious. As a child, she felt “coerced” to attend services and often brought a book with her. As a teen, she was influenced by the writings of Thoreau and Emerson, and during a college freshman English class, she read *Zen Mind, Beginner’s Mind*. It was at that time that she was first introduced to the Buddhist idea of “being at peace with yourself.” She felt that “being at peace with herself” was what she needed. Over the course of several years, she explored other faiths and practiced Sufism for about a year, which included deeply studying the writings of Rumi. Ultimately, Vicki was influenced by reggae music and its lyrics, and she began to practice SGI Nichiren Buddhism in the early 1980s, which she felt aligned with core beliefs about life she developed over time. She recognizes and embraces her roots in Judaism, and has practiced Buddhist philosophy for 40 years.

On the surface, it may seem to be an oxymoron or hypocritical to embrace one’s Jewish roots while practicing a different faith, such as Buddhism. But, being Jewish can be a religious experience and/or a

cultural one. Just as a person from an African tribe or someone who comes from an indigenous family may honor, celebrate, and embrace aspects of their cultural familial roots while practicing another faith, such as Christianity, Vicki acknowledges and embraces her roots in Judaism but chooses a spiritual path grounded in Buddhist philosophy.

### **Diana**

Diana grew up in Kansas in a Christian family that attended their Baptist church regularly— Sunday morning service and Tuesday night Bible study, along with Vacation Bible School in the summer. Her family prayed before meals and at bedtime. These acts of devotion were very important to her family and Diana saw these acts as outward manifestations of her and her family's inner faith and spirituality, she made it clear that inner faith and spirituality are what were most important:

I don't like to use the term religious. I prefer to say I'm spiritual. I'm a Christian, and I believe in God and Jesus Christ, and we had religious practices, but it was always instilled in us by our parents that it's about our personal relationship with God. My mom would often say, 'I don't have a heaven or hell to send you to. That's about you and your relationship with God.'

Nevertheless, Diana also pointed out the significance of gathering at the church building and experiencing the powerful sense of fellowship. She stated the following:

For African-Americans, churches, since slavery and segregation, were important spaces for people of color

to get together to learn about so many different things, whether it was politics or, you know, social movements or family events or activities, or whatever it was, the church was that center—that place where we could come together and worship and feel safe. And also, at church, we learned about the different things that were going on in the community. We spent a lot of time in the church ...

Diana considers herself a Christian woman of faith who desires and respects the traditions associated with attending church, but who focuses more on the deeply personal and spiritual aspects of her beliefs.

### **Aakash**

Aakash was born in 1990 in Pune—in the state of Maharashtra in India, which is a city of about 4 million people just southeast of Mumbai—on the west coast of India that faces the Arabian Sea. He shared:

I inherited the cultural tradition of the land. My name means 'sky,' and that is one of the five elements in the Indian belief system. I say Indian [belief system], not Hindu, because India gave rise to four big religions that are very closely related to each other, and they all have a similar structure. The form may be different, but the structure is quite similar in all four faiths: Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism, and Sikhism.

Aakash further explained that while he was born into a Hindu family, his paternal grandfather, who was an intellectual, was a staunch atheist, which is and continues to be something that is uncommon in India. Upon reflection, he shared that he did not learn

about spiritual matters in his home and that it was only after his grandfather's death, when Aakash was a child, that his parents sought out a suitable school for him that happened to be based on strong spiritual Hindu practices. It was at this school, called Jnana Prabodini, that he attended from 5<sup>th</sup> to 10<sup>th</sup> grades between 1999 and 2005, where he developed a spiritual foundation grounded in Hindu principles. He shared, "*Jnana* means knowledge, and *Prabodhini* means awakener. Even the name is very spiritual: the awakener of knowledge." Along with some alumni from his school who now live in the US, Aakash co-founded a secular non-profit in 2019 called the *Jnana Prabodhini* Foundation in the US. The foundation consists of 125 volunteers who are working on raising funds to support education, rural development, and women's leadership for people in the US and India. The foundation also undertakes numerous educational programs, directly working with K-12 students. So, for Aakash, his foundational spiritual ideas that center on empathy, compassion, and pro-sociality, emerged from his educational background and volunteer work linked to his alma mater.

### **Data Collection and Analysis Procedures**

This study consisted of two phases. First, we collected data through a series of online Zoom dialogues among the participants. We met weekly over the course of seven weeks, one hour each time. Vicki transcribed the dialogues using the Zoom auto-transcription service. In addition to the dialogues, we often referred back to personal journals to confirm our memories of experiences during these troubled times. The second phase of the study consisted of coding, data analysis, and the iterative writing process that included check-ins with each other to honor everyone's voices and ideas. After multiple rounds of coding, we

identified three themes as we pondered how our foundational spiritual beliefs and/or practices were impacted (or not) during troubled times, specifically linked to COVID-19 and the racial tensions during 2020.

### **Findings**

The themes we identified are: a) troublesome knowledge b) the needs of "me" and "we," and c) the interconnectedness of life. We explain these themes below, along with examples, to provide space for our voices and stories as we reflected and conversed about the intersections of our spiritual beliefs and troubled times.

#### **Theme 1: The Trouble with Troublesome Knowledge: Faith is not Being, But Becoming**

In our dialogues, we often spoke of "internal tensions" that emerged when we reflected on some of the many challenges linked to living in troubled times, particularly focusing on COVID-19 and conflicting information—specifically around the debates about wearing masks and gathering together as a faith community. We call these tensions troublesome knowledge.

"Troublesome knowledge," includes threshold, or gateway, concepts that challenge us to ponder beliefs and assumptions rarely questioned (Barradell & Kennedy-Jones, 2015; Land et al., 2014; Meyer & Land, 2003, 2005). Such threshold concepts serve to push us to question beliefs and consider other possible perspectives than those that we cling to because they are so ingrained in us through the ritual knowledge we develop through socialization (Meyer & Land, 2003; Perkins, 1999). In grappling with troublesome knowledge, we may look inward and find a deeper way to

understand ourselves, our ideas, life, and others (Barradell & Kennedy-Jones, 2015; Hill et al., 2016). Providing context and snippets from our dialogues illustrate this theme.

The tensions between supporting our faith and following science appeared at the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic in mid-March 2020 when government authorities began requiring everyone except for essential workers to stay at home. According to the Center for Disease Control (CDC, 2023), on March 11, 2020, the World Health Organization first declared COVID-19 a pandemic after there were 4291 deaths and 118,00 confirmed cases in 114 countries. Internationally, each country handled the first stages of COVID differently, and for Aakash, whose family lives in India, while he was studying in the US, presented some challenges because the Indian government delayed its response to shutting down officially until March 24, 2020. For many Hindus in India, a huge celebration was planned to celebrate Lord Rama, *Rama Navami*, between the time of WHO's declaration of the international pandemic and the time the Indian government declared a national shutdown. Aakash shared his thoughts about the government allowing this huge Hindu gathering of about 1 million people to move forward during an international pandemic, thinking:

Tell me I'm wrong, or the news is fake, and the event is not happening. I hope we all know how to draw a line between science and faith. My freedom to practice my faith ends when someone else's existence begins to be threatened by it. Let's get this straight.

Aakash shared with us that he made a social media post in which he shared his shock and

disbelief that the local state government would allow this huge religious event to occur, knowing that the WHO had already declared COVID-19 a worldwide pandemic.

The comments and backlash Aakash received for what others perceived as him "calling out" members of his own faith were swift and unsettling. It was this very point that the three of us as participant-researchers came back to often—of either presenting or being presented with some form of "troublesome knowledge" as we grappled with COVID-19 and racial unrest in 2020. We were living and experiencing a liminal world of always being in the middle of sickness and health; clarity and confusion; freedom and confinement. We were living in a state of in-betweenness of life and death because in the beginning, as we all heard reports of so much suffering, we did not fully understand COVID-19, yet we knew it was highly contagious.

How did we draw on our foundational cultural/spiritual beliefs and navigate living in this liminal world of great uncertainty? We acknowledged to ourselves and each other that we struggled a bit. Diana explained it in this way:

You know the lack of that connection and what that does to a person mentally, spiritually, psychologically, you know all those types of things ... It's made me more aware of how much of my faith I do not live up to ... how much of my belief system that I neglect to or fail to live up to ... we're not perfect, but we're supposed to be striving for knowledge that I need to do better.

Each of us chose to open up about some of the challenges within our spiritual realm as we entered the first phase of COVID-19 and its impact.



Early in our dialogues, Vicki shared, “I’m going to admit it. I felt afraid and powerless over COVID. I’m talking about the beginning right when the lockdown started, and for me that [chanting/doing my Buddhist practice] gave me some sense of power.” Diana considered what Vicki shared, and in a subsequent dialogue, she brought it up, saying “I don’t think I ever felt powerlessness or a fear, and I do attribute that to my faith and my belief in God, and that you know, ultimately, he’s in control and what’s going to be is going to be.” In revisiting some journal posts from the beginning of COVID when Vicki remembered feeling powerless over COVID, she found and shared an entry where she wrote, “it has been this spiritual practice that has sustained me.” Vicki acknowledged the feelings of powerlessness, yet recognized that her faith helped bring her through the fears. Throughout our dialogues, we found points of convergence and divergence as we considered COVID-19’s impact on us and how we navigated life at that troubled time compounded by racial unrest.

Life was dizzying, and we felt our spiritual faiths provided solid foundations. We converged on this point, as articulated by Aakash, “what I’m trying to do is to live up to some of those highest ideals ... and I think religion is not being, but becoming. Faith is not being, but becoming.” We recognized our shortcomings in the midst of our striving and constantly sought to improve ourselves in our “becoming.” In that process, we each found our own unique ways to cope. Aakash and some of his friends, part of a non-profit, sought to connect by gathering online and together do calisthenics for 21 days—concluding their session with a meditation meeting. They also organized a huge fundraiser to buy medical supplies that they contributed in both India and the US. Diana and Vicki drew on their respective Christian and

Buddhist spiritual prayers and practices, while also connecting with friends and loved ones.

Internal tensions seemed most pronounced as we pondered about challenging our faith leaders during these troubling times when we did not fully agree with some decisions either around COVID-19 or during the summer of 2020 racial uprising. Was it our responsibility to do that? Aakash shared his frustrations and disbelief during the early days of COVID-19 with how the government of his homeland chose to deal with some issues and the vitriolic backlash he received for criticizing some decisions on a social media platform. While Diana agreed, she commented that one should not tell others how to use their agency. We deeply discussed “common sense” ideas vs. faith and science vs. faith. Diana shared:

I am always hesitant to call people on what they should be doing. I mean, as Christians, we need to hold each other accountable, but I’m talking about telling someone that he or she must live out their faith in this way or that way. You know, it’s not my place. Yes, leaders have a greater responsibility because their choices and actions can have a widespread impact, but everyone has to find their own way to contribute to the cause. As long as you’re contributing to it and trying to make things better...How you do that within your family, within your community, within your church, within your whatever, is on you. And it’s your responsibility, not my responsibility to call you out on that. But you need to be doing something. We all need to be doing something.

Diana seems to emphasize that we all need to be agents of change in our own unique way, whether we are in a spiritual-faith-based community, serving as a leader or just living our lives.

Aakash pointed out that there is both a spiritual component to our faiths/religions, along with a social component. For him, “Religious leaders...have that influence, and that influence comes with responsibility.” He felt that COVID-19 tested this social dimension for all of us and that:

People and leaders were torn between what to do about this social aspect of our faith and religion/spirituality, and I was torn, too. But for me, it was a clear choice. Here is where science lies. Here is where we need to follow our conscience ... and not gather for spiritual or religious gatherings.

These internal tensions for each of us emerged in our dialogues at different times, forcing us to lean into the uncomfortable liminal space of questioning and wondering.

### **Theme 2: Faith (and COVID-19) Challenged Us to Balance the Needs of “Me” and “We”**

Throughout our dialogues, we identified an issue that we often revisited: how did our personal needs and the welfare of others sometimes merge and sometimes collide? The health mandate to isolate challenged our very human need to connect with others. Vicki expressed this point, sharing:

Of course, you wear masks, right? Because it’s not just to save your life. It is to save other people’s lives because we don’t know who has it, right? And so, within my

community, what we did was we did an outreach program. We just started calling people. ‘How are you doing?’ Connecting, right? And we would find ways to connect with people because I think the isolation...honestly, I think some people literally lost their minds during COVID because of the isolation.

This need to protect ourselves while simultaneously seeking to support, reach out, and connect with others exploded in the summer of 2020. This happened after the death in February 2020 of Ahmaud Arberry, followed by Breonna Taylor’s death in March, and then with so many people isolated and working from home to watch George Floyd die in May as a police officer kept his knee on his neck for over 9 minutes. The racial uprising of 2020 impacted us all.

Even though Diana shared that issues around racial discrimination were things “I’ve dealt with my whole life.” the summer of 2020, was different. Diana explained:

I think it may have been like when my generation was sparked by the Rodney King beating. When these senseless brutalities happen, it kind of revved up the attitude of okay, we’re not going to deal with this. We’re not going to accept this. It’s not going to be ‘Lord grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change. It’s no; let me fight and create change.

From this perspective, we considered the need for both prayer, a private matter, and action, a social matter; here is where we see the dance between “me” and “we.”

We all completely agreed that prayer, together with action, was critical. For Diana and Vicki, the daily prayers were

a constant in their lives, both before and during the troublesome times of 2020, and since both are teacher educators, they felt their action was their work on a daily basis. Diana articulated this by explaining that:

working with pre-service teachers, and trying to help them either learn how to care for students from all backgrounds or to examine their hearts, reflect, or get out of the profession because teachers can...teachers are the people who interact with every child, who can touch and change and affect and impact every life in so many ways.

This dialectical internal heart work, together with the need for action on a broader social scale permeated many of our discussions.

To resolve this within ourselves, we came to the recognition that peaceful coexistence is possible. Aakash shared his ideas, from a Hindu perspective, saying:

No issue in the world makes me feel indifferent thinking that it is not my business. It is my business because we are one family. That could be an issue of racial discrimination in the US, a war in the Middle East, or human rights issues in East Asia. All of these issues are my issues because the world is one family. We are in this together.

Similar sentiments were echoed by Diana during a different dialogue when she shared that:

Just like the three of us worship differently. We can worship how we want, and as long as our religious or spiritual practices don't cause us to harm others ... we should be able to worship how we want. We want

good things for the people we care about—health, well-being, freedom from harm; and we also want these things for people in general.

We each seemed to reconcile any tension between our personal ideas or beliefs with the needs or beliefs of others and recognized that COVID-19 had pushed us inward in surprising ways.

Vicki, for example, shared that during COVID-19, she recognized that she “developed a strong, almost need to take a walk-in nature every day, like the term I learned from Japan called ‘forest bathing.’ It’s like I need to be around trees or flowers, or a body of water every day.” She recognized the spiritual nature for this need, which Aakash echoed. He shared that the pandemic and seeing all the suffering in the world “gave me the opportunity to think about what really matters in life” beyond money or material things. These sentiments relate to the third theme, which focuses on interconnectedness.

### **Theme 3: Acknowledging the Interconnectedness of Life is the Essence of Interfaith Dialogue**

The theme of interconnectedness appeared in our dialogues numerous times. Aakash gave this perspective, as he reflected on the “lessons of COVID,” saying, “It goes back to interconnectedness ... absolutely ... COVID-19 taught us a big lesson ... a circumstance like COVID-19 helped us to understand this interconnectedness.” The very nature of COVID-19 taught us how interconnected we all are and that what happens to one of us impacts all of us in consequential ways—starting with our breathing.

Linked to this research, Diana recognized that the very act of talking openly about our different faiths showed her

that “There’s something about spirituality ... there’s something about faith, regardless of what your faith is, that can help you... that helps you get through life basically.”

Recognizing this point helped us all acknowledge our shared humanity, though we chose very different paths.

Aakash and Vicki spoke often about compassion, which is often associated with Buddhist philosophy. Because Aakash comes from an Indian background, he often spoke about compassion, empathy, and prosocial behaviors, and they were central parts of his doctoral studies. While Hinduism and Buddhism share common roots because they both germinated in India, Diana helped us consider that Christianity is also about peace and human kindness when she shared:

There is that similarity in compassion. Jesus was one of the most compassionate people in the world who, in my opinion, was the most compassionate being that ever lived and walked the earth, and we’re supposed to be trying to model our lives after him. And that’s what Christianity is supposed to be about ... that’s what we’re supposed to be doing. That’s what the Bible says. I feel like people give Christianity a bad rap, but it’s not Christianity; it’s the Christian that’s failing, not the faith.

Recognizing that deep compassion for the suffering of our fellow human beings was a core common value shared at the root of all our faiths showed us the deep interconnection we had not considered before conducting our interfaith dialogues.

COVID-19 interconnected all our lives in surprising and unexpected ways that few of us, if any, could have ever anticipated or imagined before March of 2020. Through

our dialogues, we discussed a profound link to our spiritual realm and our very existence. Aakash shared that:

These world events, maybe the pandemic or racial tensions of the world, strife, wars ... I think also gave me an opportunity to think about what really matters in life ... I started thinking, what matters, what is research-worthy? ... I think these two years gave me an enormous opportunity to think about the purpose of my life, and I’m still contemplating it.

In a similar vein, Vicki shared, “I think I emerged from COVID-19 living a much more contemplative life.” As the world is facing a “new normal” post-COVID, it is helpful to reflect on some of the many lessons each of us learned.

Diana is a self-admitted “high-functioning introvert,” who enjoys and needs time alone to thrive and function, but she brought up an important point that reverberated throughout our dialogues. And, even though she shared that she already knew this lesson, COVID reinforced it for her. Quite simply, Diana shared that “one of the lessons that I learned during these past two years of COVID is that we need each other.” During the troubled times between 2020-2022, as all of us strove to be our “best loved selves” (Schwab, 1954) and align our hearts and lives with the core teachings of our faiths, we each shared the value and importance of being with a community of like-minded people to support us in that process. Diana’s comment above was in reference to her spiritual realm. Similarly, Aakash had his network of friends who were part of a non-profit committed to serving the needs of others, and Vicki had her Buddhist community of friends.

Finally, showing and feeling care and compassion for ourselves and others was another common golden thread that united us all as we engaged in this interfaith dialogue and pondered our lives and the inner realms of our spirituality in the midst of troubled times. Aakash explained that “the right thing to do was to stay home and take care of yourself and take care of others.” For those of us with televisions, computers, or cell phones, we could not avert our eyes from seeing widespread suffering caused by COVID-19, racial and religious strife, police brutality, and immigration issues. Through our interfaith dialogues, we recognize the many tools in what Aakash termed our “toolkits” linked to our faiths. For each of us, the very process of engaging in an open and authentic interfaith dialogue taught us valuable ways we are interconnected.

### Discussion

The mindset and shared understanding we came to in the course of our dialogues and auto-ethnographic research showed us that even though we are on differing spiritual paths, we each have the capacity to focus on our personal paths, while also working towards a more just world for everyone. We recognize that our musings were our truths at that moment of time we engaged in dialogue and that our research cannot be generalizable to others, even to those who share our beliefs. This very point was made often about our faiths, too; we practice distinctive faiths and how we practice them is unique to each of us.

The very process of dialoguing about this topic pushed us, as Aakash shared, “to ponder things just a bit deeper ... and to engage in meaning-making.” Not everything was kumbaya, and we did diverge in our thinking about certain topics, especially ideas about personal choices and the

afterlife. When we recognized our views diverged widely, we acknowledged that and sought to find what bridges we could cross to reach one another. To engage in an interfaith dialogue with other scholars required an openness and willingness to be vulnerable. Based on the conceptual framework of relational realms, we experienced the ways that focusing on one realm, specifically the spiritual realm, gave us a lens to gain a deeper understanding of ourselves and each other. Through this process, we uncovered some valuable golden threads that link us all.

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