

TO SEE YOUR FACE IS TO SEE THE FACE OF GOD

Changing Interfaith Work from
Talking to Seeing and Feeling

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Twelve years ago, I hit a “bottom” in my life and needed a deeper faith or thought I would die. Because I was, at the time, a global marketing director for Procter & Gamble, I was blessed to be traveling the world. I became a photographer (a gift of grace I believe) and I began interviewing people about the role of faith changing their lives. To date, I have interviewed and made black and white portraits of 500 people in 27 countries. The focus is not religion but spiritual experience.

The Emmy Award-winning documentary filmmaker, Ken Burns, had this to say about my project, “Portraits in Faith”: “I was—we were (as several folks in the office crowded ‘round)—completely blown away. By its power and dignity, its implicit compassion and yet unblinking eye.” It was Ken Burns who said to me “Have the courage to say this is not a film” and so I realized it was meant to be an online, digital-only presentation. Every few weeks we publish one more person’s portrait along with a video preview of their interview, a quote, and some thoughts from me on the spiritual meaning of meeting this person. There are 105 portraits/interviews published so far. It has not gone “viral” but we do have 80,000 views on YouTube, so a modest beginning.

I have done quite a bit of interfaith work in my life, especially with the Catholic and Protestant Christian communities in Atlanta, Boston, Cincinnati, and now Toronto. And I have to admit, I’m tired. I’m tired of talking. I’ve come to believe that what we now need is more “Communal

Discernment.” This may be stretching the term discernment a bit, but I believe we should be in meditation together, in silence, and reflecting on each other’s beauty. Enough of the do-good banter which helps the few but not the many. I believe we need to pray for each other and with each other. And we need aesthetic tools which help us get beyond words in our prayers and help us see the divinity in each other. There is an adage that there are really only two lies in life: first, that we are disconnected from the Divine Source; and second, that we are disconnected from each other.

And so why is the aesthetic of the black and white portraits that I make of each person so important? Why do I not just publish the interviews? Is a portrait really necessary? It has and will continue to be a critical element of this project and journey.

First, it is significant that this is a portraiture project that focuses on peoples’ faces. Rabbi Leah Cohen, a friend of mine, makes this point using a Biblical story:

“When Jacob encounters Esau for the first time after the deception and many years apart, after Jacob’s ladder dream, his personal struggle with the divine and his name change... after all that when he sees Esau (who later Jewish tradition vilifies as a symbol of all evil - from Amalek to Haman to Hitler, etc.), he says, “For to see your face is like seeing the face of God” (Genesis 33:9). When I read this line sometimes I cry because it is so beautiful and essential to healing our world. It is also an interesting contrast to many traditions (Judaism included) that says a human being cannot see the face of God and live. So perhaps the only way to see God’s face is in the face of others, even or perhaps especially in the face of those we would call “other,” e.g. the Esaus, even our enemies.”

Second, I find black and white portraiture to be very important for this Interfaith work. It has power to evoke the spirit of each individual. I love how photographer Tina Gutierrez describes this. She says,

“For me black and white eliminates the distractions of overall color in the image so we can focus more on the person. The person is still black or white or brown. Still is wearing tailored clothing or rags. Still has perfect teeth or lack of dental care. Making a beautiful portrait that sees into the soul shows the essence of the human

spirit which is genderless, raceless, and equal in every way is the thing that can connect us all.”

Third, the aesthetic focus of “Portraits in Faith” allows me to be an artist. I say that this project is the one part of my life where I “get out of the way.” I was not always interested in photography. I saw that my eye turned on when I was on a Jewish community trip to Morocco where I began taking images at a home for the aged in Casablanca. Becoming an artist has a spiritual quality all its own as I truly feel like a channel. Rather than see “Portraits in Faith” as unique, I would love everyone doing Interfaith work to have a Portraits in Faith of their own. For some people that might be dance or painting or composition. If we can get out of our own way and experience “the other” aesthetically, I believe we can travel farther and longer together in common respect, understanding, and inclusion.

The Interfaith Message From 15 Select Portraits From Portraits In Faith. From “Portraits in Faith,” by Daniel K. Epstein, 2019 (<https://portraitsinfaith.org/>). © 2019 by Daniel K. Epstein. Reprinted by permission.



Tom Boechat, Vittoria, Brazil—“God’s presence is mysterious and it affects us in ways that cause both upheaval and peace.”



Naná de Yemanjá, Sao Paolo, Brazil—“The Mother loves us and gathers us in to protect us.”



Davi DaSilva, Sao Paolo, Brazil—“Do not be afraid of the one you think is not like you.”

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Kathleen & Shawn Burns, Cincinnati, Ohio—“We’re in this together and our bond will never be broken.”



Della Sala Vitaliano, Rome, Italy—“If a law is unjust, we must protest it.”



Arya-Siddhanta Dasa, Alachua, Florida—“Ecstasy was no longer working for me but my teacher was speaking to me about Spiritual Ecstasy.”



Yoon Yong Sang, Seoul, Korea—“The Universal energy is more powerful than any human limitations”.

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Boyong Mesina, Muscat, Oman—"The message of the Divine is constantly surrounding us and is evident in all places."



Maha Khawaja, Dubai, UAE—"A living faith often requires we mix the ancient and the modern in ways that make sense to each individual for their journey."



Samson & Diana Korelekar, Mumbai, India—"God provides those to look out for us and shelter us from harm."

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Tim Costello, Melbourne, Australia—"Interfaith work requires we get out of our comfort zone."



Uncle Bob Randall & Barbara Randall, Mutitjulu, Australia—"Mother Earth supports us in all of our journey."