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Faith as a Way Forward



By Claire Fialkov

I usually look forward to the year-end photo section of the *New York Times*, but 2015 was called the year of the great unraveling. Political and religious conflicts threatened the globe, creating uncertainty and anxiety. I found myself gazing at pictures of the Islamic State in Palmyra and Paris, Aleppo, and San Bernadino. Seeing the pain inflicted by Boko Haram and the Shabab in Africa. Witnessing abuse in Myanmar and Ukraine, and the defeat of serious Mideast peace talks.

How do we remember that new worlds of meaning are possible? How might we channel the resources of social constructionist practice to inspire a way forward, to create more faith and life giving energy in the world?

This past summer my colleague, David Haddad, and I did an inquiry about trust and safety with Kimo, an NGO of healthcare counselors and educators in Kenya. Many members of Kimo lived through ethnic or civil wars and community trauma; they are a resilient bunch. We started by creating an appreciative interview that asked, *"How do you know when trust is present in a relationship, in a team, in a community? What nurtures trust and safety? What are your early experiences with trust in a family or in a group?"* We talked a lot about our mutual experiences with trust. We invited comments and structured reflections about each other's personal histories and shared cultures. We wondered about the new possibilities that might emerge in the community if the valuable lessons of the past were used to create a way forward. Instead of using our English word "trust," Kimo preferred to call the interview "Imani," a Swahili word that translates to mean "faith." Nelly Nduta Ndirangu and James Karanja Kamau, Kimo team leaders (and new Taos Associates) said they had faith that the process of staying in the conversation would work. Knowing that even when we come from different tribes and disagree, we can join together. Nelly said that the benefit of having an environment of faith is that it *"erases fears of interacting... this causes peacefulness and an improved positive focus on life."*

Research suggests that people who survive and rebound from trauma frequently have had an early caregiver who showered them with unconditional love. Trust comes from early on and bubbles up when we are again surrounded by safe and secure relationships. Faith is born out of harder times, when we need to draw on our resilience to survive and thrive. Faith is the capacity *to not despair*. The good news is that we are flexible and open to change throughout our lifetimes. We can all decide to collect micro experiences of faith throughout our lives that give rise to Imani, the faith that things can change and we can make our way forward together.

On December 21, a bus was traveling on a dirt road near Mandera, in the far Northeast corner of Kenya. The bus was attacked with gunfire and two passengers were immediately killed. The narrative had become painfully familiar, with Shabab militants ordering passengers off the bus with a separation of Christians and Muslims and the intention to kill the Christian "infidels." But this time faith prevailed. Muslim passenger Abdirazak Aden Yarow said, *"First, one of us shouted that we were all Muslims, and then everyone did the same."* Clothing was quickly exchanged, with the Christian women receiving headscarves from the Muslim women on the bus. In the chaos, the gunmen became confused and ordered, *"Go back to your bus!"* Nairobi Islamic scholar Sheikh Mohamed Ibrahim Shakul said, *"it is good people see the real position of the Muslims...this is going to bring bond and closeness."* The driver of the bus, Shukri Farah Abikar said the community will not be separated because, *"We live together and travel together on this road."*

As I was looking at the *New York Times* photos of the year, I was grateful to remember the Mandera bus story. Let's all remember that new worlds of meaning are possible. Focus on the photos of the global climate change deal, the lowering of the Confederate flag over the South Carolina State House, the UN deal to limit nuclear ambitions in Iran, and the raw faith of hundreds of gatherers outside Notre Dam Cathedral in Paris to commemorate the victims of the terrorist attack. During this first month of the New Year, let's continue to discover, elevate, and send back into the community the powerful faith building practices of everyday life.

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