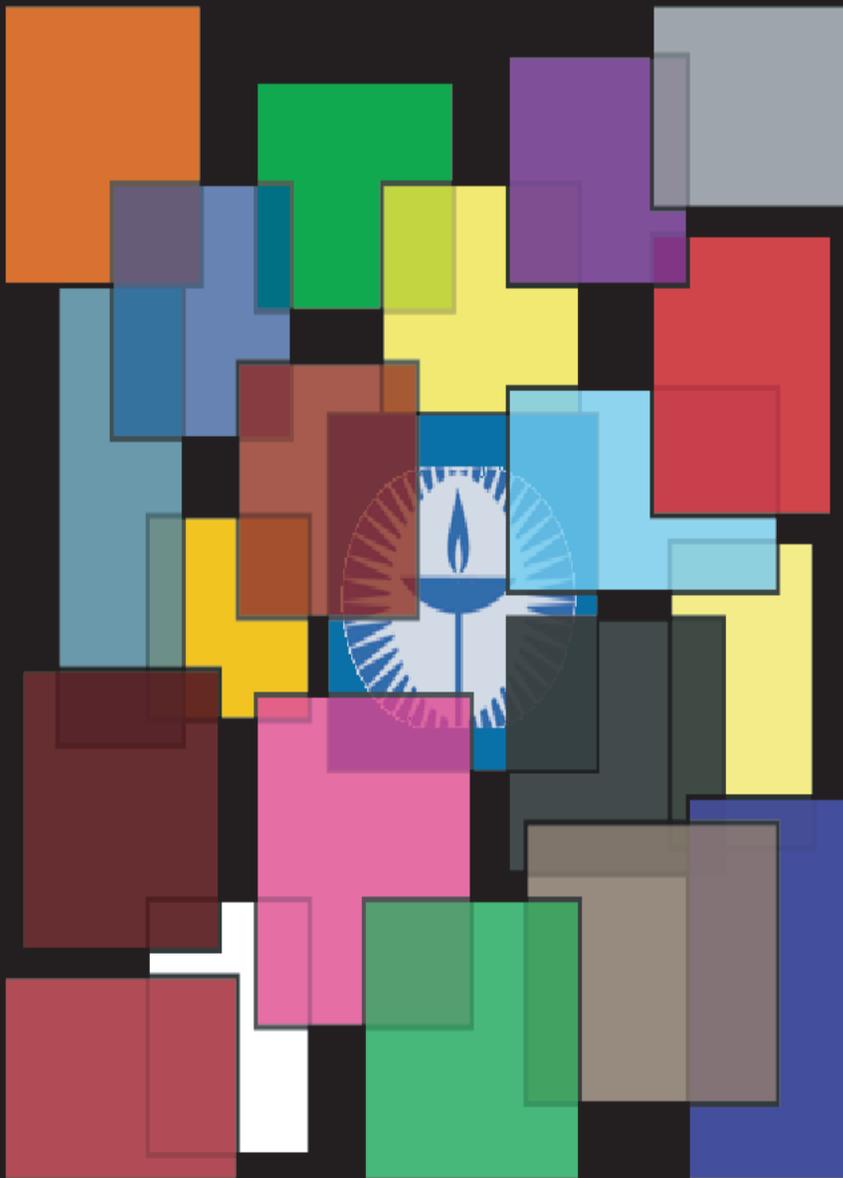


STUDY GUIDE

COMMON



info: www.uua.org/commonread

READ

Acts of Faith

The Story of an American Muslim,
the Struggle for the Soul
of a Generation

by Eboo Patel

TALK

Discuss

in congregation, community or virtually.

A discussion guide is available at
www.uua.org/commonread

ACT

Work Together

on interfaith dialogue, understanding
and action.



Introduction

In his memoir, *Acts of Faith*, Eboo Patel shares his faith journey as an American Muslim and the call to religious pluralism which led him to found the [Interfaith Youth Core](#) (IFYC). *Acts of Faith* frankly discusses the appeal of religious fundamentalism to young people, observing that young people's spiritual hunger entwines with their desire to make a mark on the world. Patel challenges those who believe in religious pluralism to support young people, providing what is needed to help them ground themselves in a faith that both fuels their deepest passions and feeds their cooperation across faiths to make the world a better place. Although Patel's memoir focuses on young people, his call to interfaith understanding and respect through side-by-side service and justice making work resonates with adults of all ages and life stages.

Patel was appointed by President Obama to the Advisory Council of the White House Office of Faith Based and Neighborhood Partnerships and serves on the Religious Advisory Committee of the Council on Foreign Relations. He founded IFYC in answer to his own wondering: Why do so many stories about religion these days feature young people fighting in the name of God? Why isn't there a huge movement of young people from different faiths working together to apply the core value of all faiths—service to others? As a Rhodes Scholar at Oxford, he was encouraged to follow his heart and bring to life his dream of an interfaith youth service leadership organization, rather than pursue his ideas theoretically in the academic profession.

This discussion guide provides a framework for responding to Patel's religious journey and to his strong advocacy for interfaith dialogue and action. Readers are invited to share their own spiritual and religious journeys and formative interfaith experiences in a safe and trusting community. Discussion groups will explore Patel's call for pluralistic people of faith to work together, each serving the community from their own place of deep religious faith and identity. They will reflect on his challenge to support young people who long for multifaith communities of action that make a positive difference in the world. The

discussion will engage the soul and the heart as well as the mind, and call us to be more faithful Unitarian Universalists while practicing a humility that enables us to work authentically with others whose faith perspective and commitments differ from our own.

This discussion guide is flexible. Adapt it to congregational, cluster, or District programming for adults of all ages and life stages, for campus groups or young adult groups, for youth groups, or for cross-generational groups. Two formats are offered:

- A single, 90-minute session
 - * Can be expanded for a two-hour session
 - * Can be offered in two parts to accommodate a 45-minute Sunday forum format
- Three, 90-minute sessions
 - * Can each be extended to a two hour session by lengthening the amount of time for conversation, discussion, and sharing

Single Session:

Goals

This discussion guide will:

- Provide a framework for responding to Patel's religious journey and to his strong advocacy for interfaith dialogue and action
- Invite readers to share their own spiritual and religious journeys and formative interfaith experiences in a safe and trusting community
- Invite readers to explore Patel's call for pluralistic people of faith to work together, each serving the community from their own place of deep religious faith and identity.

Materials

- Chalice, candle and lighter or LED battery-operated candle
- Newsprint, markers, and tape

Preparation

- Write these covenant points on newsprint, but do not post:
 - We agree to speak from our own experiences and perspectives.
 - We agree to listen respectfully to the experiences and perspectives of other people.
 - We agree to pay attention to the group process, making sure that everyone has the opportunity to speak and to listen.
 - We agree to use this time as an opportunity for ethical, religious, moral and spiritual discernment, rather than as a time to debate politics or public policy.
- Gather information about existing interfaith projects and programs in your own community. Talk with your congregation's minister or religious educator. Is there an interfaith clergy group that can help you? Projects that commonly include people from more than one faith community include service projects, such as soup kitchens and building homes, and advocacy projects, such as support for equal marriage or for humane immigration laws.

Chalice Lighting/Opening Reading (3 minutes)

Light the chalice and share these words by Rev. Mark L. Belletini:

For religion to be significant, it has to provide more than the comforts of community. It also has to provide opportunities for deepening, for ...spiritual growth, and for the casting down of false images of stereotypes, which hurts us all. A good religion has to open us to the real diversity of our modern world. For our work as liberal religious people is not to be competitive with others, and to find ways to supersede others, but rather to find ways to supersede ourselves, to grow beyond our limitations and our constrictive boundaries, each and every one of us. Diversity, you see, must not end up being some sort of feel good slogan, a word we keep in our back pocket to make us feel like we're broad minded. Diversity is a gift. But it cannot be a gift... unless it is received. It is only received when there are hands and hearts open enough to receive it. And

the opening of fists into welcoming hands and welcoming hearts is our spiritual work.

Creating a Covenant (10 minutes)

Post the covenant points you have written on newsprint. Propose them as guidelines. Ask if any points need to be clarified, added, or amended. Note changes on newsprint. When the covenant is complete, invite participants to voice or signal agreement.

Introductions and First Impressions (15 minutes)

Tell participants you will invite each person to introduce themselves and take a sentence or two to speak of one idea, impression, or question that was provoked by reading the book. If it is appropriate with your group, you may want to mention the tenth anniversary of September 11th and invite them to speak about their reflections on the role of religion in the public lives of young people—terrorists, political activists on all sides, social justice workers, and so on. Allow silence for two or three minutes for people to find their words. Then, invite each person in turn to speak briefly uninterrupted, asking them to name only a single point. Mention that for this conversation and any others, each person reserves the right to pass. If your group has more than six participants, consider dividing into groups of three or four to share impressions.

Discussion (15 minutes)

Read: page xv, *Acts of Faith*: “I believe that the twenty-first century will be shaped by the question of the faith line. On one side of the faith line are religious totalitarians. Their conviction is that only one interpretation of religion is a legitimate way of being, believing, or belonging on earth...On the other side of the faith line are the religious pluralists, who hold that people believing in different creeds and belonging to different communities need to learn to live together...It is the belief that that common good is best served when each community has a chance to make its unique contribution.”

Lead a discussion using some of these questions:

- What implications does Patel’s notion of the “faith line” have for our public discourse?

- To what does this idea call us as Unitarian Universalists? To what actions does it call us?
- What have been your experiences with multifaith or interfaith dialogue? With worship? With social action or justice making? What has worked well and what do you wish had been different? Note: For the purposes of this discussion guide, “multifaith” involves people from many faiths participating in the same action or conversation. “Interfaith” involves a conversation between people of two faith groups.
- How comfortable are you exploring questions of theology and practice with those of another faith tradition? Have you ever had such a conversation? How did it start? What made it comfortable for you to engage with the other person or people?
- Does Patel’s call for pluralism (and his faith story) offer a fuller picture of Islam and its teachings than you previously held?

It is likely that local interfaith or multifaith service or advocacy projects will be mentioned in the course of the discussion. Where appropriate, briefly introduce the information you have gathered about existing interfaith efforts in your community, but make sure that discussion of the questions takes precedence over lots of information sharing.

(Optional break for 45 minute forums)

Sharing (30 minutes)

Invite participants to share, one at a time, without interruption stories about their own faith journey, reminding them that they always reserve the right to pass. If your group has more than six participants, consider dividing into groups of four to six. Ask them to respond as they wish to one or more of these questions:

- When have you felt a longing in your life to deepen your own Unitarian Universalist faith identity?

- Do you have friends, family members, co-workers, or neighbors who come from a faith tradition different from your own? What impact have conversations and experiences with those of other faiths had on your faith journey?
- How has your faith journey intersected with a longing to make an impact on the world?

Conversation (15 minutes)

Invite participants to respond to what others have shared. Remind them that the group has covenanted to speak from personal experience and perspectives, rather than challenging the validity of another's experiences and perspectives.

Closing Reading (2 minutes)

Pluralism is not a default position, an autopilot mode. Pluralism is an intentional commitment that is imprinted through action. It requires deliberate engagement with difference, outspoken loyalty to others, and proactive protection in the breach. You have to choose to step off the faith line onto the side of pluralism, and then you have to make your voice heard. — Acts of Faith, p. xix

Three Sessions

Goals

This discussion guide will:

- Provide a framework for responding to Patel's religious journey and to his strong advocacy for interfaith dialogue and action
- Invite readers to share their own spiritual and religious journeys and formative interfaith experiences in a safe and trusting community
- Invite readers to explore Patel's call for pluralistic people of faith to work together, each serving the community from their own place of deep religious faith and identity
- Lift up Patel's challenge to support young people who long for multifaith communities of action that make a positive difference in the world and

- invite readers to consider whether and how young people are being supported in their own faith communities
- Provide suggestions for taking action through interfaith dialogue and interfaith and multifaith service and justice making projects.

Session 1:

Materials

- Chalice, candle and lighter or LED battery-operated candle
- Newsprint, markers, and tape

Preparation

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 - We agree to use this time as an opportunity for ethical, religious, moral and spiritual discernment, rather than as a time to debate politics or public policy.

Chalice Lighting/Opening Reading (3 minutes)

Light the chalice and share these words by Rev. Mark L. Belletini:

For religion to be significant, it has to provide more than the comforts of community. It also has to provide opportunities for deepening, for ...spiritual growth, and for the casting down of false images of stereotypes, which hurts us all. A good religion has to open us to the real diversity of our modern world. For our work as liberal religious people is not to be competitive with others, and to find ways to supersede others, but rather to find ways to supersede ourselves, to grow beyond our limitations and our constrictive boundaries, each and every one of us. Diversity, you see, must not end up being some sort of feel good slogan, a word we keep in our back pocket to make us feel like we're broad minded. Diversity is a gift. But it cannot be a gift... unless it is received. It is only

received when there are hands and hearts open enough to receive it. And the opening of fists into welcoming hands and welcoming hearts is our spiritual work.

Creating a Covenant (10 minutes)

Post the covenant points you have written on newsprint. Propose them as guidelines. Ask if any points need to be clarified, added, or amended. Note changes on newsprint. When the covenant is complete, invite participants to voice or signal agreement.

Introductions and First Impressions (30 minutes)

Tell the group you will invite each person to introduce themselves and take a sentence or two to speak of one idea, impression, or question that was provoked by reading the book. If it is appropriate with your group, you may want to mention the tenth anniversary of September 11th and invite them to speak about their reflections on the role of religion in the public lives of young people—terrorists, political activists on all sides, social justice workers, and so on. Allow silence for two or three minutes for people to find their words. Then, invite each person in turn to speak briefly uninterrupted, asking them to limit their thoughts to a point or two. Mention that for this conversation and any others, each person reserves the right to pass. If your group has more than six participants, consider dividing into groups of three or four to share impressions.

Sharing (35 minutes)

Invite participants to share, one at a time, without interruption stories about their own faith journey, responding as they wish to one or more of these questions:

- What parts of Patel's faith story are similar to your own?
- When have you felt a longing in your life to deepen your own Unitarian Universalist faith identity?
- Do you have friends, family members, co-workers, or neighbors who come from a faith tradition different from your own? What impact have conversations and experiences with those of other faiths had on your faith journey?

- How has your faith journey intersected with a longing to make an impact on the world?

Conversation (10 minutes)

Invite participants to respond to what others have shared. Remind them that the group has covenanted to speak from personal experience and perspectives, rather than challenging the validity of another's experiences and perspectives.

Closing Reading (2 minutes)

*The emphasis on commonalities and common ground presumes a truncated vision of human relationships. The connections that give life meaning- that bring delight and joy, that evoke and sustain work to heal, to end injustice, to establish fairness- at times take the form of the shock of recognition. But just as often, the connections that give life meaning come from the shock of difference, of being surprised by the novelty of someone else's insight, by the jolt of unpredictability, by having someone act in a way that offers a different perspective, an unpredictable and telling social critique or alternative strategy for acting justly. A major aspect of the feeling of respect and of love is the joy of otherness- knowing that the other person or group exceeds our comprehension, prediction, and control...In all of our interactions, there can be a place of familiarity and also openness to being surprised, to being challenged by the differences of another's way of seeing and acting. — Sharon Welch, *Sweet Dreams in America*, p. 61*

Session 2

Materials

- Chalice, candle and lighter or LED battery-operated candle
- Newsprint, markers, and tape
- Covenant from Session 1

Chalice Lighting/Opening Reading (5 minutes)

Remind participants that this reading from the book recalls Patel's high school relationship with Lisa, who was a Mormon. It comes from p. 35 in *Acts of Faith*

Lisa's religiosity focused on truth. Basically, Mormons had it and others didn't. It was not Lisa's choice to believe it was this way. She did not control truth; that was God's to give. Did she believe it? Did she follow it? I could tell it pained her sometimes. My grandmother, my mother's mother, lived with my family while I was in high school. She was as sweet as they come, joyful and pious, cackling loudly at all sorts of jokes when she wasn't praying her tasbih, sneaking pinches of chewing tobacco when my mother wasn't looking (it helped her stay awake, she insisted), and joining my brother and me in clearing the driveway of autumn leaves with the household tool that fit her hand best: a spatula.

"Will she go to heaven?" I asked Lisa, a bit defiantly, one afternoon. Lisa turned away. She was too smart not to have asked herself the question, but she couldn't bear the answer. "She will go somewhere good," she finally said. Lisa's answer satisfied me. I could tell it said more about her heart than Mormon theology. I decided her heart mattered more, a conviction that has shaped my life and work ever since...

Light the chalice and review the covenant from Session 1.

Sharing (30 minutes)

Invite participants to share, one at a time, their response to Patel's assertion that the heart matters more than the theology in understanding a person of a faith different from yours. Invite them to share their own stories about interfaith conversations and relationships. If your group has more than six participants, consider dividing into groups of four to six. Ask them to respond as they wish to one or more of these questions.

- Is there or has there been an important person in your life whose theology and faith commitment is different from your own? How do you navigate those differences?

- How do you explain your own Unitarian Universalist faith commitment, spirituality, ethical or moral stances and identity to those close to you who do not share them? Do you feel well able to do this?
- Do you sometimes feel less able than those of other faiths to articulate what it means to you to be a Unitarian Universalist? Are you longing for more solid theological grounding or better ability to communicate why being a Unitarian Universalist leads to you a particular action, ethical commitment, or moral stance?

Conversation (15 minutes)

Invite participants to respond to what others have shared. Remind them that the group has covenanted to speak from personal experience and perspectives, rather than challenging the validity of another's experiences and perspectives. Mention that for this conversation and any others, each person reserves the right to pass.

Sharing (23 minutes)

Invite participants to share, one at a time, responding to one or both of the following:

- What communities do you belong to that make the world a better place? How do you bring your Unitarian Universalist faith to your participation in those communities?
- If you are not part of an interfaith community working to make the world a better place, imagine what it would be like to be part of such a group. What do you want to learn/experience from others? What would you like to share about your own faith? How would your cooperation make a difference for the work you are doing? How would it deepen your own faith?

Discussion (15 minutes)

You may wish to post blank newsprint to record participants' contributions; you might ask a volunteer to note ideas while you facilitate discussion. Ask:

- What about Patel's story or about his call for pluralistic faith communities to take interfaith conversation and action seriously most compels you, or us, to take action?
- What actions might we take, as a group or individually, in response to the book and the issues it raises?

Present a range of possible actions:

- Invite others to read *Acts of Faith* and organize more discussion groups.
- Learn more about [Interfaith Youth Core](#) (IFYC).
- Lead [A Chorus of Faiths](#) in your congregation or cluster. A Chorus of Faiths is a Tapestry of Faith program for high school youth based on the work of the Interfaith Youth Core. The program builds skills for interfaith and multifaith dialogue and action to make the world a better place.
- Join an interfaith or multifaith justice making project or an interfaith group in your community. Talk with your congregation's minister or religious educator to find out more about existing efforts. Is there an interfaith clergy group that can help you? Projects that commonly include people from more than one faith community include service projects such as soup kitchens and building homes and advocacy projects, such as support for equal marriage or for humane immigration laws.
- If you cannot find an interfaith or multifaith justice making project in your community, organize one.
- When you are engaged in a project that involves people from other faith communities or traditions, practice talking with others about how your faith or your Unitarian Universalist values ground your service.
- Practice humility and deep listening when inviting others to share how their faith or their religious values ground their service.

Closing Reading (2 minutes)

Pluralism is not a default position, an autopilot mode. Pluralism is an intentional commitment that is imprinted through action. It requires deliberate engagement with difference, outspoken loyalty to others, and proactive protection in the breach. You have to choose to step off the faith line onto the side of pluralism, and then you have to make your voice heard. — Acts of Faith, p. xix

Session 3

Materials

- Chalice, candle and lighter or LED battery-operated candle
- Newsprint, markers, and tape
- Covenant from Session 1

Chalice Lighting/Opening Reading (5 minutes)

I can only answer the question, ‘What am I to do?’ if I can answer the question, ‘Of what story or stories do I find myself a part?’ — from Alasdair MacIntyre, a British philosopher, quoted in Acts of Faith, p. 101

Light the chalice and review the covenant from Session 1.

Reflection and Sharing (25 minutes)

Remind participants that part of what grounds Patel’s work and the work of Interfaith Youth Core is the idea that young people long for both a clear faith identity and a way to make a powerful impact on the world. If your group is primarily youth and/or young adults, pose these reflection questions:

- Of what story or stories do find yourself a part? Are you part of a faith story? A community story? Do you long for clear faith or spiritual identity and/or a chance to make a powerful impact on the world? Do your religious values impact or guide your moral and ethical decision making and actions? As a young person growing up in a global world where multiculturalism is a daily reality, what wisdom do you have to offer to those who have grown up in more homogeneous cultural or faith settings?

If your group is primarily those who are in their middle years or elder years, offer this reflection and questions:

- Think about one or more youth or young adults in your life (your congregation, your family, an organization to which you belong, and so on). Hold that person or people in your mind for a few minutes. Ask yourself, “Of what story or stories do they find themselves a part? Are they part of a faith story? A community story? Have you made space for them to share their thoughts about their faith commitments and religious and moral values and their longing to make an impact on the world? How might you do that, individually and/or as a congregation?”

Wait two or three minutes and then invite participants, as they are moved, to share their thoughts and reflections. If your group crosses generations, guide them in dialogue and conversation using both sets of reflection questions.

Discussion (25 minutes)

Depending on the make-up of your discussion group, use one or both of these questions. If you have a multigenerational group, the conversation may be rich indeed!

- If you are an older adult, how are you supporting the young people in your life?
- If you are a young person, what kind of support do you have, or wish you had, for your spiritual deepening, better understanding of Unitarian Universalism and for making an impact in the world?

Ask:

- How would or does working together with people from other pluralistic faiths enhance your life and make a difference in the world?

Reading and Discussion (30 minutes)

Read this passage from *Acts of Faith*, p. 148-149.

*The totalitarians have put their resources into building youth programs.
The pluralists haven't...*

[When it comes to faith community programming] *Most people choose themselves over their kids. It is an entirely understandable choice, but we should not be blind to the consequences. It means we will continue to fail our religious youth...*

Too many adults secretly consider the absence of young people in mainstream religious communities the natural course of events, viewing the kids as too self-absorbed, materialistic, and anti-authoritarian to be interested in religion. The result is that adults pay lip service to the importance of involving youths in faith communities, but let themselves off the hook when it comes to actually building strong, long-lasting youth programs. Youth activities are typically the top item in a congregation's newsletter but the last line in the budget.

Ask:

- How accurately does Patel describe our congregation, faith community, or faith-based organization?
- What should we do to change things for the better?
- What actions is this group—or individuals in this group—willing to take?
- Record responses on newsprint and decide how to share your ideas with the congregation or organization.

Closing (5 minutes)

Read this quote from *Acts of Faith*, p. 110:

...I closed the Qur'an, touched it to my forehead, and kissed it. Outside, the grass at Oxford, greener than anything I had ever seen before, seemed as if it was shining and pointing to heaven. Two blue-winged birds flew out of one of Oxford's towering trees into the hedges below, cawing loudly. I saw a boy and his mother walking, finished with their afternoon play, going home for dinner. She playfully grabbed the ball from him and

began to run away with it. He laughed and followed her. This was creation. God had made it holy, had entrusted humanity to be His representative here. From the time of our ancestor Adam, each human had been given God's breath, a great goodness that not even the angels could perceive but that God knew and spoke of. And what were we able to do that the angels could not, that gave us the ability to serve as stewards of creation? We could name things. We had creativity. We could learn and apply our learnings to improve creation. And suddenly I understood my grandmother in India better. And Dorothy Day and King and Heschel and Gandhi and the Dalai Lama. I felt as if I had a glimpse into their goodness, as if I knew something more of their Source.