




## **Spiritual Exchange In Pluralistic Contexts: Sharing Narratives Across Worldview Differences**

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### **Abstract**

GROUNDED IN NARRATIVE INQUIRY, this study explored the ways in which graduate and undergraduate students representing different worldview identities come together in dyads to share stories that reflect their existential and spiritual development. The study revealed two contrasting types of exchange: (1) deep, personal exchanges that involved a disclosure of significant life experiences in conversations built upon mutual understanding and rapport (2) and distal, surface exchanges that consisted primarily of information sharing. Deep, personal exchanges had the potential to transform participants' perceptions of self and others, but contextual aspects of the exchange-including personal background and approaches to constructing identity-also played a role in the transformation process. The paper concludes with best practices for residence life professionals interested in facilitating spiritual exchange among diverse college students.

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## Spiritual Exchange in Pluralistic Contexts: Sharing Narratives Across Worldview Differences



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As U.S. society becomes increasingly diverse both culturally and religiously, young adults are faced with more opportunities than ever before to engage with and learn from those whose backgrounds, beliefs, values, and ways of life differ substantially from their own (Wuthnow, 2007). From a certain vantage point, demographic shifts promise to enrich the lives of this generation, opening young adults to new ideas and possibilities. On the other hand, growing diversity creates tension and hostility in the world around us; as Eboo Patel lamented, “the evening news is full of stories of faith-based violence, and our public discourse has a constant undercurrent of religious prejudice” (2012, para. 5). Given the reality of discord and aggression wrought by religious and worldview differences, Patel posed some compelling questions for higher education leaders today:

What if recruiting a religiously diverse student body, creating a welcoming environment for people of different faith and philosophical identities, and offering classes in interfaith studies and co-curricular opportunities in interfaith leadership became the norm?....  
What impact might a critical mass of interfaith leaders have on America over the course of the next generation? (2012, para. 10)

From an empirical perspective, we are beginning to understand how collegiate conditions and experiences might be tailored to build the critical mass of interfaith leaders that Patel advocates. For example, recent studies that explore the campus climate for religious and spiritual diversity reveal that provocative encounters with worldview diversity during college—particularly when these encounters challenge students to reconsider their beliefs and assumptions about their own and others’

worldviews—are related to students’ degree of openness to and acceptance of people of other religions and worldviews (Bryant, 2011; Bryant Rockenbach & Mayhew, 2013). Not only do students have an opportunity to grow from these challenging experiences, but such encounters may also leave them feeling more satisfied with the degree of spiritual diversity on their campus (Bryant Rockenbach & Mayhew, in press).

Although campus climate studies help to illuminate general patterns related to student experiences and outcomes, we know little about what is actually taking place as students engage with peers of other worldviews. Research on intergroup dialogue suggests that facilitated conversations about social identities (e.g., race, class, gender) provide promising opportunities to instill appreciation for diversity, disrupt social and economic barriers, generate positive cross-cultural relationships, and foster commitment to social justice advocacy (Zúñiga, Lopez, & Ford, 2012). However, few studies within the higher education context portray the nuances of college students’ inter-worldview engagement and the developmental implications that stem from in-depth conversations that cross religious lines. One notable exception is Small’s (2011) qualitative investigation of college students’ faith frames. Observations of intra- and intergroup dialogue involving Christian, Jewish, Muslim, and atheist/agnostic students revealed the discourse strategies students used when confronted with challenging discussions, as well as the privileging and marginalizing forces that shaped how students engaged in dialogue and experienced campus life. Small’s extensive analysis of interfaith exchanges serves as an informative

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source of innovation for practitioners seeking to construct fruitful inter-worldview discussions among diverse students.

In sum, there is evidence to suggest that exposure to worldview diversity has important ramifications for student development, especially in terms of openness to religious and worldview pluralism, and that inter-worldview dialogue, if designed effectively, is a promising practice to enhance students' ability to empathically engage people of other worldviews—yet conversations across difference in college so often take shape in spaces *outside* the purview of faculty, administrators, and student affairs educators. What can be done to promote spiritual exchange within higher education contexts, specifically within residential settings? First, two important questions need to be answered. Beyond formal structured dialogue involving groups of students, what is the nature of informal exchanges between two students who each claim a unique worldview identity? How can our understanding of these exchanges inform practice, particularly in residence life where students regularly encounter peers of different worldviews?

## RESEARCH QUESTIONS

In light of the need to understand the possibilities for one-on-one exchange, we conducted a study exploring the ways in which people who embrace distinct worldviews come together to discuss meanings and stories that reflect their existential and spiritual development. The study was conducted as part of a graduate-level course, *Qualitative Approaches to Studying Spirituality in Higher Education*, designed to accomplish two essential purposes: introduce doctoral and master's students to current

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issues surrounding religion and spirituality in higher education and engage students in a collaborative class research project grounded in the narrative inquiry tradition. The collaborative class research project was guided by the following questions: What is the nature of the exchange that takes place between people of different worldviews? How do people of different worldviews co-construct narratives about their spiritual and/or existential experiences?

## RESEARCH METHODS

Narrative inquiry is an approach within the qualitative paradigm that involves studying the human experience through stories (Merriam, 2002; Webster & Mertova, 2007). Because people make sense of and organize their lives through the stories they construct, the narrative approach is particularly useful for illuminating complex human phenomena (Webster & Mertova, 2007). Narrative analyses explore the multiple meanings of stories and are attuned to plots, characters, critical events, and time and place (Hones, 1998; Webster & Mertova, 2007). Moreover, narrative research

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is co-constructed such that researcher and participant identities are performed in the context of the exchange (Riessman, 2008).

### **Participants**

The research team, made up of eight graduate students and one faculty member, explored how spiritual exchange unfolds and evolves among individuals with differing worldviews. In line with the narrative inquiry tradition, the graduate student researchers were simultaneously participants, and each individual was matched with one of eight undergraduate partners of a different worldview. The undergraduate students were at least in their third year of college, in order to enhance the likelihood that they would be developmentally ready to engage in dialogue about their worldviews and spiritual experiences. The undergraduate participants were recruited through posted advertisements and listserv emails targeting student organizations that were religious and/or diverse in nature (e.g., Women's Resource Center, Campus Ministries, the GLBT Center). Prospective participants were asked to complete a brief demographic survey that aided in the purposeful selection of a diverse sample, which, when considered together with the graduate student researchers, included eight women and eight men; these included three African Americans, two Asian Americans, two Latino/as, and nine Caucasians. Participant worldviews included Atheism, Judaism, LDS/Mormonism, Neo-Paganism, Protestantism, Roman Catholicism, and unstructured spirituality. Selected undergraduate participants were compensated with \$50 for the time they devoted to the study.

### **Data Collection and Analysis**

Prior to entering the field for interviews with the undergraduates, the graduate student participants explored their own narratives by generating autobiographical field texts to situate their experiences in the inquiry space (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). These autobiographies focused on the graduate students' spiritual and existential experiences against the backdrop of their distinct worldviews. Graduate-undergraduate dyads met three times over the course of the semester to exchange stories about spiritual, religious, and/or existential experiences. Because the focus of the study was on exchange, the interviews were conversational in nature and intended to promote mutual disclosure between the gradu-

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ate and undergraduate student participants. The interviews were guided by a semi-structured protocol developed by the authors, and the questions were answered by both partners in the dyad. The first interview focused on the role of religion and spirituality in participants' lives and stories about the development and significance of their worldviews. In that interview, the graduate-undergraduate dyads responded to general questions that were asked of all participants (e.g., "How would you describe your worldview?" "Who has influenced your worldview through your life?" and "What difficult experiences have you had in relation to your worldview?") as well as unique questions that surfaced organically in each conversation. At the end of the interview, participants were asked to take 10 photographs with a digital camera to capture what their worldview means to them. In the second interview, each member of the dyad shared the pictures and relayed their meaning and also asked questions about and commented on the partner's pictures. The dyads also discussed how the process of exchanging spiritual experiences and stories will inform future interactions with people who hold different worldviews. Prior to the third meeting, the research team emailed each undergraduate participant the graduate student researcher's interim research text depicting the first two interviews in a co-constructed narrative. The third meeting served as a member check, when the undergraduate partners had an opportunity to respond to the analysis. Each interview lasted between one and two hours and took place in private, quiet spaces. With the permission of the undergraduates, the research team audio-recorded the interviews and generated verbatim transcripts and field

notes. To protect participants' confidentiality, pseudonyms were used in all transcripts and field notes.

The exchanges were analyzed dialogically (Riessman, 2008) to illuminate distinctive approaches to dialogue across difference. Within dialogic analysis, language is not just studied for "what" is spoken and "how," the dialogic/performance approach asks "who" an utterance may be directed to, "when," and "why" (Riessman, 2008, p. 105). The data collection yielded an array of field texts, including interview transcripts, field notes, photographs, and graduate student autobiographies, and these sources served as the basis of interim research texts (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000) that explored the undergraduates' narratives in conjunction with the graduate students' narratives. To generate the interim research texts using a dialogic framework, the interim research texts attended to context, interaction, and participants' interpretation of the exchanges (Riessman, 2008). Each transcript was analyzed by the researcher who took part in the exchange and also by another member of the research team. Through an iterative process, including group reflection, all interim texts were integrated and synthesized to highlight core findings of the study.

### **Trustworthiness**

Throughout the study, the graduate student participants attempted to clarify their own experiences through journaling and collective reflection to enhance the trustworthiness of our interpretation of the findings. In addition, they conducted member checks (Merriam, 2009) by sharing the interim research texts with the undergraduate participants and discussing the

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accuracy of their representation of the exchanges. The research team revised these texts on the basis of this feedback, thereby enhancing the co-constructive narrative process. Finally, data were triangulated through accumulating several forms of data and involving multiple researchers in the analysis (Merriam, 2009).

## RESULTS

The research team identified four overarching dialogic patterns evident in the data: significance of personal contexts, approaches to identity construction, contrasting types of exchanges, and transformational experiences within the exchange.

### Significance of Personal Contexts

As Riessman notes, “Stories don’t fall from the sky” (2008, p. 105). A variety of contexts come into play in an exchange between people, and the exchanges that transpired in this study were no different. Participants did not come into the dialogue space as blank slates or share their stories in a vacuum. Individual

backgrounds—where one was born, how one was raised, where one went to school—all influenced the interactions between dialogue partners. Anna (undergraduate) and Francine (graduate student) came from different cultural backgrounds but were able to find common ground early in the conversation by identifying shared beliefs and values embedded in their respective worldviews. Together they reflected on the role of personal context (namely upbringing and parents) as an important backdrop against which they came to discover nuances in their perceptions and practices.

Anna: In my own worldview, I feel [I am] a Christian, but not like a super devoted one. . . . My mom grew up . . . a Christian. My dad is not Christian at all. He doesn’t believe in any religion right now. . . . I kinda feel like when I’m not comfortable or when I’m upset . . . having some spiritual reliance help[s] me a little bit, like, in feeling a lot better. So . . . I would say I’m a Christian, even though I’m [not] too, too devoted, like, as in going to churches every Sunday or reading the Bible every morning. But I still believe [the] basic principles of Christianity, like Jesus Christ and stuff. And also . . . I believe in Karma, like, you know, if someone do[es] something bad, then something bad is gonna happen to them in return.

Francine: And I, too, would describe myself as Christian. I grew up in a Christian home. And we kind of went church shopping a lot when I was a kid, so I’d go to different church[es] a lot. And so, I would say that’s kind of my perspective still. Even though my parents have found something that they’re very happy in, it’s not something that I necessarily espouse. And so, I’m still, like, searching for, I guess, my version of



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Christianity that I like... I grew up pretty conservatively. [I'm] looking for something a little bit more liberal, a little bit more open, I guess, to other faiths, so to speak. So, I guess, like, I would still consider myself to be a general Christian.

In this moment of their exchange, Anna and Francine found connection in claiming a Christian identity, albeit one set apart from what they perceived "Christian" to mean in the traditional sense (e.g., religiously engaged, conservative).<sup>1</sup>

### Approaches to Identity Construction

As participants articulated their worldviews during the exchanges, most went beyond mere alignment with rote doctrine or prescribed traditions. Instead, participants engaged in active identity construction by qualifying what they meant by their self-ascribed worldview labels. Dyad partners spent significant time reiterating the complexity of their worldview and ensuring that partners understood and appreciated key definitions and distinctions. For instance, to identify as Catholic was not sufficient; participants sought to move past the category to express a unique and individually relevant identity. Paul (graduate student) clarified the meaning of Christian so as to distance himself from stereotyped perceptions of his faith tradition:

I come from a Christian background. But I don't like the idea of religion; I don't like the idea of rules for people, and there are so many bad connotations.... Again, I feel

comfortable with my faith, my internal faith, and it's a very personal thing for me, and I try to share that by being myself. I don't really believe in pushing it at people at all.

In her dialogue with Pearl (graduate student), Thorn (undergraduate) explained the nuances of the Neo-Pagan label by sharing the complex history within which Wicca is situated and how, in her journey, she has moved toward a more individualized worldview:

I'm Neo-Pagan, which is kind of a meaningless term actually... Even when you look it up in the dictionary it's pretty vague... But if you want to get more specific, which I think we should, I'm Wiccan, which in and of itself means different things to different people. The short history is that Wicca was founded very roughly in [the] 1950s in Britain... and it develops in England and gets carried over into the United States in [the] '70s, [where it] combines with the New Age [movement]... and the women's liberation movement... and they kind of fuse. So Wicca in England is not the same thing as Wicca in the United States. The particular tradition that I'm a part of is more akin to what goes on in Britain... I've been on my own, and that in and of itself has morphed into something else. And that's why now I'm more inclined to just call myself Pagan.

### Contrasting Types of Exchanges

From a dialogic perspective, participants' clarification and construction of identity took place in two distinct ways: (1) through deep, personal exchanges involving storytelling and

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<sup>1</sup> Francine and Anna were paired for the exchange because, although both had woven Christianity into their worldview, at the time of the study their labels were sufficiently distinct. Francine identified her primary worldview as "Liberal/Feminist/Naturalist (with a Protestant/Evangelical Christian Background)" and Anna identified as "Christian (with a Buddhist background)."

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disclosure of significant life experiences in conversations built upon mutual understanding and rapport (2) and through distal, surface exchanges consisting primarily of information sharing, an acceptance of the presumed authority of the speaker, and an infusion of intellectual perspectives. Reflecting the deeper, personal type of exchange, Irene (graduate student) and Danielle (undergraduate) wove personal narratives into their dialogue, going beyond simple description of how one develops a spiritual perspective or worldview and displaying how storytelling can connect two people within a dialogue:

Irene: Can you describe your earliest meaningful memory related to your worldview?

Danielle: We were driving back [home from another state]. . . . And, at the gas station, [my father] just like broke down crying, and he confessed all this stuff to my mother . . . I think that's when I started really putting my faith in God. . . . I can't even believe this is happening. To me. To my family. I can't believe my dad is one of those people that, you know, my mother always tells me to watch out for. [My father] completely disrespected [my mother] by cheating on her all that time. I think seeing what my mother did, her reaction to him [staying married to him], was really, like, the most life-changing spiritual experience for me. . . . She's like the rock of the family.

Irene: One of my earliest meaningful worldview memories is also a car ride. My mother actually passed away right before my senior year of high school. And we were on a road trip at the time. . . . That was probably one of the most meaningful instances of . . . just kinda opening

up my eyes. Like, I'd never really had to think about heaven or hell. And so I think that was very meaningful in terms of starting to change my worldview to begin to include the God idea.

We can see many elements of personal context, identity development, and transforming experiences through this type of deeply personal exchange. Such exchanges serve to build comfort and rapport and create a safe environment for sharing and reflecting.

In contrast, we observed several examples of distal, surface exchanges in which partners avoided depth and personal engagement in favor of information sharing. Typically, exchanges of this nature were more likely to occur when one of the dyad partners was unfamiliar with the other person's worldview. In these situations, one partner was put in the position of teaching her or his partner, shifting the balance away from mutual exchange and de-emphasizing storytelling. In this instance, S. J. (undergraduate) provides a foundational background on scriptures sacred within Judaism in response to Paul's (graduate student) questions:

Paul: I am interested in the Torah. The Torah is the first five books of the Old Testament, is that right? Now that doesn't include Isaiah, does it? [Are those] some of the same things that you're taught?

S. J.: Yeah, it's pretty much the Hebrew Bible . . . it's split up into three sections. You have the Torah . . . which is essentially the story of how our people came to be. . . . It's the creation of the world, going through the Patriarchs and getting to Moses. . . . And then you have the Prophets, which starts with Joshua and just goes through . . . Judges and Kings and Isaiah, Jonah, Ezekiel, and all of that. Then you have the Psalms.

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The conversations were both personally transforming, in that participants described the change in self-perception and the positive experience of having someone listen to their story, and also mutually transforming, in that participants described the change in how they viewed others in the process of spiritual dialogue. Transformation was especially evident in deep, personal exchanges.

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### **Transformational Experiences Within the Exchange**

Returning to the notion of transformation, which was a common theme in many of the narratives shared, a significant component of our spiritual exchanges was the self-described transformational experience that participants had, to one degree or another, as a result of the exchanges. The conversations were both personally transforming, in that participants described the change in self-perception and the positive experience of having someone listen to their story, and also mutually transforming, in that participants described the change in how they viewed others in the process of spiritual dialogue. Transformation was especially evident in deep, personal exchanges. In this closing exchange between Megan (graduate student) and John (undergraduate), we can

see the mutually transformational experience shared by each and how the learning that took place through their exchange has the potential to shape future dialogue:

Megan: So, how was this for you, this whole process?

John: It was awesome, it was amazing. . . . We are from two completely different walks of life. . . . We still view things differently in some aspect, but we also view some things the same. . . . People have different views of the world because they are raised in different parts of the world. However . . . there remain these intangibles, I guess, that make people, people.

Megan: For me, it is a really energizing experience and it just affirms for me how much I like to talk to people, you know, about what they think and about what is similar and different and that kind of thing.

John: I take from this experience . . . that it is possible to just sit with an individual and just, you know, listen to them. And just figure out where they are coming from. . . . And I think it's cool just hearing another person's story and comparing that to the things I have heard in the past, or my own viewpoint. And I think that it just enables me to be more open to other people.

## **DISCUSSION**

In this study of one-on-one spiritual exchange it was important for us to understand not only *what* was said in conversations, but also *how* conversations evolved between strangers on a topic as personal and potentially divisive as worldview. As research on campus climate and intergroup dialogue attests (Bryant, 2011;

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Bryant Rockenbach & Mayhew, 2013, in press; Small, 2011; Zúñiga et al., 2012), the opportunity to engage with diversity through challenging—even provocative—discussions with others who bear different social identities has the capacity to alter unchecked assumptions, open possibilities for relating across difference, and even catalyze transformation of one’s worldview. At its best, spiritual exchange provides a space for sharing stories about connectedness and growth over the course of one’s life, making meaning of spiritual and existential experiences, and articulating an authentic worldview identity that is true to one’s personal context and individuality.

### **Limitations**

This study is not without limitations. First, although the intent was to examine conversational and informal aspects of inter-worldview exchange, the meetings did involve some structure (e.g., semi-structured protocols and photo elicitation) that was consistent across all dyads. The findings might be different had we observed dialogue occurring naturally among students of different worldviews on campus. Second, although we did our best to minimize hierarchy in the exchanges, undergraduates and graduate students do not hold the same degree of power within the academy and are likely in distinct places developmentally. Such differences may have influenced the rapport between partners and the richness of conversations. While this study provides a firsthand portrayal of the ways that 16 students conveyed their worldview to others who held different perspectives, we urge higher education scholars and practitioners to continue pursuing important related questions. For example, how

does the nature of spiritual exchange change as those in conversation build a relationship, moving from strangers to friends? Can strategies for spiritual exchange be effectively taught in the classroom and in out-of-class settings? And what is the evidence that preparation for spiritual exchange leads to constructive dialogue among students and, after college, to interfaith leadership in the broader society?

### **Implications for Practice**

Based on our learning of what works well (and not so well) in one-on-one dialogue, we offer the following ideas for practicing spiritual exchange, and we encourage student affairs educators who work in residence life to draw on their own creativity in implementing initiatives and to consider approaches that are attuned to their unique institutional context. Setting the stage for spiritual exchange is of utmost importance to ensure that conversations are constructive and meaningful. As an initial step, housing professionals must make it possible for spiritual exchange to take place. In our collaborative class project we were explicit in our design and purpose; students were assigned to dyads, and we established parameters for discussion topics that were the focus of three conversations during one semester. Another option is to create conditions where exchanges can be initiated more organically. For example, housing professionals might develop living-learning communities emphasizing worldview diversity and dialogue where students with different beliefs and values will naturally come into contact with one another. Living-learning communities expressly designed to encourage inter-worldview engagement can be established with policies that encourage stu-

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dents to share rooms and suites with peers of other worldviews. Whether students encounter peers of other worldviews through structured programs or informal interactions with roommates and suitemates, housing professionals can play an important role in preparing students for exchanges through workshops hosted in the residence halls. The housing

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workshop facilitators can help students devise strategies for actively seeking opportunities on campus to learn about diverse religious and non-religious worldviews so that they come into exchanges with at least a basic level of interfaith literacy. The workshops should also involve time for students to reflect individually and in groups on their own spiritual journeys. Writing a spiritual autobiography and sharing key themes in discussion with others is an approach that worked well in our class. Another important element of housing workshops focused on spiritual exchange entails helping

students to appreciate the purpose of spiritual exchange—namely, to learn about another's spiritual story and worldview in the absence of any particular personal agenda.

Once students are equipped with strategies for enhancing their own religious literacy and self-understanding—and have an appreciation for the purpose of spiritual exchange—subsequent efforts sponsored by residence life staff can cultivate students' understanding and application of the essential elements that contribute to rapport and depth in spiritual exchanges. These are strategies that housing professionals can model for students through advanced workshops devoted to experimenting with spiritual exchange in low-pressure settings. At the outset, exchange partners need to take time to define concepts and identity labels. Language differs from person to person, and establishing early on how each person characterizes concepts like spirituality and worldview and also what s/he means by a self-ascribed worldview identity is a worthwhile practice. Partners should also seek to understand and appreciate how personal contexts—upbringing, family, communities, and significant transforming experiences—shape worldview development. In sharing personal experiences, partners should give one another the space to be an individual, free from the obligation to speak on behalf of or in defense of his or her faith or worldview group. The exchange should involve mutual vulnerability and disclosure in the storytelling, with partners taking turns conveying their own stories and affirming and asking questions about the other partner's stories. As partners connect through the exchange, they will likely identify areas of common ground, but it is important that they also remain open to

and honor the differences in beliefs, values, and practices they discover. Finally, so that the exchange is enriching and consequential, partners need to enter the dialogue space with a willing spirit, prepared to learn and perhaps be transformed through the spiritual exchange.

In the end, residence life is an ideal space on campus for blending informal engagement and focused programming on spiritual exchange.

Living-learning communities are a promising venue for fostering inter-worldview encounters in students' day-to-day lives—as they socialize, dine, and study together—and for inspiring learning and action via spiritual exchange workshops facilitated by housing professionals. Through the innovative efforts of housing professionals, the higher education community can take proactive steps forward and cultivate new norms of inter-worldview cooperation.

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## Discussion Questions

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1. Discuss the question posed by Patel as quoted in the opening of this study. Specifically, offer ideas about how this discussion could occur around other social issues such as racial diversity and gender diversity.
2. Presume you are establishing a living-learning community that emphasizes worldview diversity. Write the statement of purpose for this new community to be presented to the director of residence life; write the promotional statement that would be used to recruit students.
3. Religious/spiritual dialogue and interfaith exchanges are viewed as educational tools to promote pluralistic views. However, the promotion and facilitation of such dialogue is likely to be very complex and difficult. Despite this, what are the advantages of students engaging one another in this type of dialogue?
4. What are some programmatic ideas to promote a healthy and respectful exchange about spirituality?
5. What resources are available on your campus to assist staff with addressing this sensitive area?