

## Natalie Gulbrandsen: A Jewel in the Crown of Interfaith Relationships

Natalie Gulbrandsen was a jewel in the crown of dedication and commitment to Unitarian Universalism, its Association and its international outreach including the Partner Church outreach and the International Association for Religious Freedom, the oldest interfaith organization begun in Boston over 100 years ago by a group of Unitarians who were inspired by the World Parliament of Religions in Chicago. She was president of the IARF international council for three years and a faithful attendee of its congresses every three years where ever it was held...in the United States, England, Europe, India, Japan and South Korea. Along with the Rev. Frank Robertson, she promoted and supported the circle groups at these congresses where individuals from all over the world gathered in small groups sharing with one another their religious faith, their professions and photos of their families. In spite of the language difficulties, friendships were developed which lasted from one congress to another. Natalie believed with all her heart that personal relationships were the key to interfaith understanding. She always convinced that this opportunity to meet face to face with others of a different religious tradition was the foundation for peace and it was also the unique contribution of the International Association for Religious Freedom.

Natalie had a quality of dignity that never failed to improve the quality of an occasion. I remember when the UUA Board of Trustees went down to Washington D.C. for the civil rights march for gay, lesbian and bisexuals, Natalie appeared dressed in a lovely suit, wearing sensible shoes and carrying her purse. She was a stark contrast to others in the parade who had decided to be liberated from the waist up...no cover up for them. I asked Natalie if she always dressed for such an occasion and her answer was predictable, "Doris, it is important to add dignity to any occasion and to me, that requires being dressed properly."

Her presence of dignity reminded me of an IARF Conference held in Clearwater, Florida when Professor Fasching from the University of South Florida in Tampa gave a presentation on dignity as being the essence of interfaith relationships and understanding. He related the story of Jacob wrestling with the stranger found in Genesis, the first book of the Bible. Perhaps you remember that Jacob had cheated his brother Esau out of his birthright as being the first born in the family. That birthright was an essential privilege in those ancient days so that his deception...those hairy arms and that wonderful pot of beef stew...caused a great deal of hatred between the brothers. And now at the time of this story, Jacob was coming with his family to meet his brother after years of hostility. Naturally Jacob is

fearful that his brother Esau will be angry and seek to kill him, his family (and the definition of family was not “one man, one woman” in those days), his servants and his animals. In order not to put these possessions at risk, he goes alone to sleep by the river that he must forge in order to meet his brother. At night Jacob has this powerful dream. He is accosted by a stranger who wrestles with him until dawn. In the process, Jacob’s hip is injured and yet he is not defeated, but blessed and transformed. While the stranger refuses to reveal his own name to Jacob, he gives Jacob a new name, “Israel,” which means he who wrestles with God and human beings and prevails. As the dawn comes the stranger flees, and Jacob walks away limping, confessing that he has seen God face to face.

Using this dream, Professor Fasching confronts us with the basic challenges involving those authentic ingredients needed for genuine religious interfaith dialogue. We need to begin with ourselves. We must begin with ourselves. All of us here, at one time or another, have looked into the mirror and seen a stranger wondering what roles, what relationships, what purpose is being played out by that image reflected in the mirror. And we wonder is this the person I really am...or want to be...or should be? Of course, we all know that this is the beginning of wisdom, to know thyself, to confront the alienation within ourselves from our best selves. Jacob did not

need a mirror to discover this alienation and he did not need to seek out his brother but somehow the realization of the deception and hatred he had caused as a young man became the motivation in his mature years to ask for reconciliation with his brother. The fascinating thing is that Jacob did not need to find his brother, he did not need to go to the river by himself, he did not need to dream nor did he need to wake up wounded by the dream's struggle. But he did and thus we have the first condition for being ready to understand others...it is to understand ourselves...to dream the dreams of guilt and reconciliation.

The capacity for that awareness that we are sometimes strangers to our best selves, that we are willing to struggle with our guilt, that we are open to infinite possibilities beyond our finite selves is the essence of our dignity as human beings. Isn't this what happened to Jacob? Deception and hatred could no longer be part of his best self. Returning to his brother was to struggle with that guilt and then to discover in that struggle a new identity, infinite possibility beyond that former self. He found in reconciliation the essence of his dignity.

Professor Fasching is convinced that his concept of dignity transcends all definitions. "Our humanity cannot be captured and confined by such elements of social identification. Nor can the humanity of others. Every

attempt, based on gender, or color, or religion, to keep others “in their place” is nothing less than capitulation to prejudices and stereotypes that violate the dignity of others.