



My First Inter-Faith Encounter

By David J. Goa

The North American Van lines truck was finally empty and drove away at 4:30 PM. It was the 15th of August, 1951, my birthday, and that night was the first night we slept in our new home in King Edward Park in Edmonton. We had moved from Camrose, from the comfort of a tight-knit Norwegian immigrant community to the big city fifty miles (as we said in those days) northwest. The row of modest new homes along 78th Avenue, built by the Lakusta brothers, all needed landscaping. That would come with the following spring along with the first vegetable gardens. One block over stood a farmer's field.

I took my father's hand and we walked half a block to 80th Street, turned north and walked another four blocks and crossed the well graveled main street that connected the University to highway 16. The Whyte Avenue of my memory, in my neighbourhood, remained a gravel street for most of my childhood. We needed milk and butter and a few other things and my father had spotted a little convenience store across Whyte Avenue. Once inside I wandered about checking out what was on the somewhat dysfunctional shelves.

My father had emigrated from Norway as a young man and it was the custom in his home town to shake hands with virtually everyone you met. In the convenience store he had stretched out his hand to greet the gentleman behind the counter, said "hello" and introduced himself. My father was named for the Irish resurrection hero, Finn McCool. The name Finn caught on in Norway a thousand years ago, the work of Irish monks, and the gentleman who took his hand was Moses, a name loaded with meaning even for me as a young child.

I was raised in the landscape of the Bible. The stories of Abraham, Sarah and Hagar, Isaac and Rebecca and Ishmael, Jacob and Leah and Rachael, Joseph and his Egyptian wife Asenath and his brothers, of Moses and the prophets and, of course, of my namesake David, the Psalmist and King, were part of our daily reading and conversation. At seven years of age I thought this was how everyone grew up. And, now, I was standing listening to my father in an animated conversation with Moses, who I later learned was the owner of the store.

A visit to Moses' store was a regular part of our life for a number of years. My father, a carpenter by training and a lay Biblical scholar by avocation, built new shelves for Moses several years later and I helped install them. The installation took longer than it ought because Moses and my father would take lengthy breaks to engage in their shared and distinct understandings of biblical narrative.



My First Inter-Faith Encounter continued...

Every time I was in the store with my father we also took a journey into the landscape of the Bible. I listened carefully as he sought to understand how his new friend and neighbour understood texts that my father loved and held so close to his heart. In my late teens when I first read the great scholar Martin Buber's discussion of how Jews read the Bible and of our need for what Buber calls "an I- Thou" relationship to biblical text, I thought of that first visit to Moses' convenience store, to the conversation between two men, one a Jew and one a Christian, sharing an uncommon love for a common text. Both stood on the foundations of their distinct religious traditions as they turned to each other.

Friendship was forged in the deep mutual engagement in thinking together out of what each brought to the conversation. By the end of each conversation there were always more distinctions to appreciate and, at least for my father, a deeper regard for the mystery of how these narratives unfolded in the mind and heart of Moses. These conversations, distinctions and mysteries were carried into his reading and re-reading of the Biblical narratives throughout his life. And, I suspect that it was in the vigor and golden hue of these conversations that the desire to understand how others understood was born in a seven year old boy.

The greatest of the Hebrew Prophets, Moses, and the Irish resurrection hero Finn, and their namesakes, bequeathed to me a singular gift: the luminous presence that comes to shape spiritual friendship when two people engage each other out of what is best in their understanding and so glimpse "the image of God" in each other.