



## Guest Voices

Other Views On Faith and Its Impact on the News.

### Repairing Religious Wounds

**By Wendy Sternberg, MD**

*Founder, Executive Director, Genesis at the Crossroads*

*"We will not be able to mention any religion (Jewish, Christian, Islamic); we will replace any sentence including religious references with the following: Different Musical Trends."*

I stared at that message on my computer screen that May morning, rereading the e-mail from Egypt. I was creating a series of programs for the Egypt's Alexandria Library's Eighth International Music Festival in July. They would include the debut of Saffron Caravan - a musical ensemble I had assembled from Iran, Afghanistan, Cuba, Morocco and the United States, under the aegis of **Genesis at the Crossroads**. Our program featured the world's only harmonica concerto and a series of master classes designed to expose talented, aspiring Egyptians to music from other countries, cultures, and religions. Our Arm Them With Instruments program would bring instruments to youth in parts of Egypt with little, if any, arts education.

A salient example of my past decade of work was "orchestrating" the festival's historic closing performance: It was to include a triumphant piece, jointly composed by the Maestro of the Alexandria Library Chamber Orchestra and two members of my ensemble, (Muslim and Jewish, respectively), to be performed by them, under his baton.

In July 2008, out of respect to the current Arab-Israeli conflict, we were asked not to perform three program selections in Hebrew. Out of deference, we acquiesced, changing selections to Ladino, learning Fel Shara and other Samais, and converting a vocal Jewish call to prayer to an instrumental, jazz version. It was an opportunity to expand ourselves, grappling with the complexities of cultures in conflict and the essence of religion in general, not just our own. It was a unique occasion to abandon self-righteousness and fully embrace the transcendent power of the arts.

I am most interested in cultures in creative exchange, and that singular moment when artists or audience members are profoundly moved by an artist of another faith, rendered incapable of lump-summing others into the "enemy camp." And then what? What do they do with the knowledge that their souls have been irrevocably affected by the opposing side? What do they teach their children about the "other side," and how does this affect their artistic work, their communities and, ultimately, the global community?

Genesis at the Crossroads' work is committed to bridging cultures in conflict through the creative and neutral space defined by art. We publicly bring together people of faiths that are undoubtedly at odds. Our work is about strengthening that fragile, seemingly untenable bridge.

I have coined the term arts-diplomacy for this powerful work. It is my life's journey, after 14 years in medicine: two careers dedicated to healing humankind, albeit from different angles.

I responded to the email: "Over the last nine and one half years, Genesis at the Crossroads has taken a bold stand all over the world... our message has been shared across many cultures, ethnicities, and religions, and has been welcomed wherever we perform... We believe that modifying our message and complying with your request to edit our descriptions, and therefore our identity, will narrow such vitally important dialogue, and undermine our mission and vision."

I am a Jewish-American who has had the privilege of sharing meals in homes in the Bah'ai, Buddhist, Christian, Hindu, and Muslim communities. I recognize that, although we all come to the table with varying religious and political beliefs, we all desperately crave human connection. It is from our most basic level that we wish to share ourselves and be known for who we truly are. This is the transformative power of Genesis at the Crossroads.

Tikkun Olam, an essential tenet of Judaism, teaches us to dedicate our lives to repairing the world. Jewish couples are married under a Chupah - a makeshift structure, open at the sides and closed to the elements above. It is open all around for a reason: that in forming the sacred bond of marriage, we never shut ourselves out from the community around us. That community is to inform, guide, and challenge us, and take us to task. Tikkun Olam was never intended solely for the Jewish community; it is much more powerful when shared with and directed to our entire world.

Ironically, the Alexandria Library stands out as the first place where rabbis were called together to translate the Old Testament into Greek for Hellenistic Jews and early Christian theologians, and where texts were edited, for the first time, to improve their content. It was where scholars convened to study, exchange ideas, and be the better for it. It is the testament to society's ability to attain enlightenment.

There was a time in Egyptian history when, reaching far beyond the walls of the Alexandria Library, Arabs, Jews and Christians worked together... and society flourished. If we are to reclaim our rightful place at the helm of our society, celebrating our diverse cultural and ethnic riches, learning from one another and all being better off for it, then this is the lesson. As the Dalai Lama reminds us, "When you lose, do not lose the lesson."

I take pride in embracing other cultures' religious wisdoms, which help me strengthen and clarify my own. The Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.'s words inform my actions. He said, "Our lives begin to end the day we become silent about things that matter."

This is why I **withdrew our programs** from the Alexandria Library's Festival and let go of one of the most honored places for Genesis at the Crossroads' work to be shared: to retreat courageously from the slippery slope, and downward trajectory, where the message gets diluted and identity blurred, to become softer, gentler... and ultimately meaningless.

*Dr. Wendy Sternberg is founder and executive director of **Genesis at the Crossroads**.*

BY WENDY STERNBERG | SEPTEMBER 9, 2009; 3:52 PM ET

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