

FREE TRIP TO EGYPT

**FILM
DISCUSSION
GUIDE**



FREE TRIP TO EGYPT

DISCUSSION GUIDE

VERSION 1.0

**Welcome to version 1.0 of the
Free Trip To Egypt Film Discussion Guide.**

We intend to frequently update this guide with news, articles, exercises, reviews and other resources to assist you in your exploration of civility, deep listening and authentic, compassionate conversation.

Please check the FTTE website often to download the latest version of this guide: [**FreeTripToEgypt.com**](http://FreeTripToEgypt.com)

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INTRODUCTION

TAREK MOUNIB

The world seems to be getting crazier with each passing day as people experience greater levels of distrust, suspicion, demonization, alienation, and polarization, topped off with rampant racism. Are we headed for global war and conflict? I mean, if a country like America, which historically has been considered a beacon of freedom and tolerance is now eliciting such racist rhetoric, is there any hope for the creation of a just, equitable, inclusive and sustainable global society?

These are just some of the questions that have burdened me. Like countless other people, I have felt powerless over the apparent trajectory of the world—that is, until late 2016, when I had an unexpected inspiration! Instead of sitting on my couch watching the news and getting increasingly angry at the racism and fear that spew out from segments of the population—what would happen if I were to connect with such persons in a spirit of kindness, instead of fear? What could I do to begin a dialogue and connect with them? This was my dilemma. Then, one day while sitting on a train in Switzerland, this idea came to me: Why not seek out the very people who seem to have concerns about my culture and offer them a free trip to Egypt? What would happen if I were to pair people from completely different backgrounds and bring them together, face-to-face? Would their shared humanity outweigh their cultural differences? And could they set aside their political affiliations and religious beliefs in an effort to connect in meaningful discussion?

When I set out to find the answers, I was taken aback by the hostility I encountered. Social media posts such as, “I would never go there. I hope Trump kills every single one of them”—not only shocked me, they also caused me to wonder if I was utterly foolish to even consider embarking on such an adventure, not to mention if anyone would be daring enough to accept my offer of a free trip to Egypt. Undaunted, I flew to the United States and launched my road trip, randomly encountering people across the country to whom I extended the invitation. This is precisely when my faith in humanity was restored!

When I personally connected with people on the streets, regardless of political affiliation, religion, ethnicity, age or economic status, it was a much different experience than hearing about them or watching them on the news. In a spirit of honesty, these encounters caused me to realize that I too had my own prejudices, preconceived notions and assumptions about Americans based on their personal beliefs, opinions and political affiliations. Having always considered myself to be a non-judgmental person, I was truly forced to humbly re-evaluate this self-perception. And I continue to do so as new circumstances arise.

Eventually, my adventurous team members and I succeeded in finding 7 individuals who, although concerned about visiting the Middle East, were courageous enough to discover what might await them. When the trip finally took place, I was absolutely amazed at the depth of the connections that we formed in just 10 days. (*cont.*)

INTRODUCTION CONTINUED

I couldn't have imagined that such a diverse group of individuals would find their way to the authentic togetherness we established. How encouraging it was to realize that our experience reached far beyond filmmaking...after all, if we could get along, why not the rest of the world? The answer to my initial question at the beginning of this Introduction came in loud and clear: There absolutely is hope for the world!

As for me, my deepest hope is that Free Trip to Egypt transmits the magic all of us who participated experienced, and how possible it is for this magic to become a living reality for us all through relating to one another with civility, deep listening to the views of others, and engaging in authentic conversation, because when we do, the possibilities are limitless.

The Free Trip to Egypt Discussion Guide is my way of continuing my exploration of our shared humanity and offering my reflections on what I have begun to learn. I am hopeful that both the film and discussion guide will serve to encourage all those who participate to self-reflect upon their own inner experience. Toward that end, I share with you now some of my personal insights.

I've become aware that when I'm confronted with a person's worldview I feel is hostile or dangerous, many times my reaction is quite emotional, leading to a self-righteousness where, without realizing it, I become mentally and/or verbally combative towards those who express such opinions. Of course I can justify or rationalize why this occurs and thereby make myself feel good and powerful in my righteous indignation. In the end, however, does this really serve anyone, myself included? I clearly realized it didn't.

During the trip to Egypt, I felt those same judgmental feelings well up in me when hearing what appeared to be racist rants and extreme opinions. Then something inside me said, "Just listen," which I did. It was then that I realized that simply by listening and sincerely trying to understand, some very unpredictable things can and do occur. For example, when I was more open-minded, the person(s) with whom I was engaging also opened up. We truly met. Sometimes the other person changed his/her opinion, sometimes I did, and sometimes no one's opinion changed. In each of these circumstances, I still felt a sense of connection, and hoped that we hadn't become enemies. It is this deep listening that I continue to explore and deepen. (*cont.*)

Listen with ears of tolerance.
See through eyes of compassion.
Speak with the language of love.~ Rumi

You are a citizen of this world,
and there are things you can do
to lift the human spirit.
Things that are easy, things that are free,
things that you can do every day:
civility respect, kindness, character.

~Aaron Sorkin

INTRODUCTION CONTINUED

Also related to this are my assumptions about and stereotyping of people with certain attitudes and professions. For example, when I first met Brian at the Louisville, Kentucky Trump rally, even though I liked him, I unconsciously assumed certain things about his personality, what type of person he was. For example, what would come to your mind upon first meeting a tall, muscular, bearded, Caucasian former Marine at a Trump rally? More likely than not, it probably wouldn't be that he was loving. Well, as I got to know Brian, I realized that he was a man who was truly motivated by love. On his arm is a tattoo of this biblical verse from John 15:13: "Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends." The love a Marine has for his Marine brothers informed his motivation and passion for becoming a Marine. I learned a lot from Brian, including what can happen when we stay open and don't assume we "know" the person standing in front of us.

One of the biggest lessons I learned was about tolerance and intolerance. When I first met Jason, within the first hour he asked me to accept Jesus into my life. While I appreciated his zealousness, I asked him if he felt a person could have transformative spiritual experiences outside the parameters in which he had experienced them. In response, he quoted a biblical verse which made his implication clear: the only way to God was through the belief system of his religious tradition. For nearly two days, Jason and I remained locked in non-stop debates. My thinking was that I was trying to open his eyes to a more tolerant worldview—nevermind the fact that the way in which I was relating to him was quite intolerant! Once I caught myself, I realized that if a person doesn't have a worldview that includes violence and domination, why fight against it? It was at that point that I let go of my desire to change Jason and saw him as the wonderful human being that he is, one who embraces everyone with love and kindness, a courageous person who generously opens his home to others, who compassionately helps the homeless and everyone who crosses his path. Put simply, a man with a heart as wide as the world.

From each of my fellow travelers I learned something inspiring: Jenna's compassion and care for others was admirable. Katie's phenomenal courage in opening up so deeply and authentically was an example to us all. Marc's insights into each person's personality and the way he brought calm to situations with heart instead of domination was a true gift. I will also never forget how Ellen and Terry stepped bravely into the unknown. Coming from Fawngrove, Pennsylvania with so much fear of the world, their willingness to step out of their comfort zone was truly inspiring, and to have witnessed their deep transformation was deeply moving.

So let us all continue the journey and the discussion as we do our part to make the world just a little bit better—each of us, in our own unique way.

You cannot **truly listen**
to anyone and do anything else
at the same time. ~Scott Peck

Communication leads to
community—
understanding, intimacy and
mutual valuing. ~Rollo May

Genuine tolerance does not mean
ignoring differences as if differences make
no difference. Genuine tolerance means
engaging difference within a
bond of civility and respect. ~Richard John Neuhaus





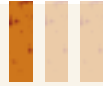
THE THREE PILLARS OF #PLEDGETOLISTEN

Civility, Deep Listening, and Authentic Conversation form the three pillars of the #PledgeToListen. Together, they reflect the taproot of kindness implanted within the human heart.

The benefit of learning more about them is so that we can more accurately gauge how they are active in our lives, along with setting an intention to deepen our practice of them. “Every change of mind,” the Dalai Lama wisely reminds us, “is first of all a change of heart.” As viewers witnessed in the individuals who accepted their free trip to Egypt, when intimately interacting with people and cultures different from one’s own, it is an open, receptive, and willing heart of Civility, Deep Listening, and Authentic Conversation that has the power to shapeshift the societal and cultural conditioning that has influenced our beliefs, judgments, opinions, and values.

Before skipping ahead to the invitation to take the #PledgeToListen, we encourage you to read the following descriptions of the three pillars and reflect upon them on both the individual level and as a citizen of our global family. To support you in identifying how the pillars currently function in your life, each one is followed by questions for self-reflection.

Are you in? Then get ready to put on “new eyeglasses” and freshly view your world through the lens of the heart.



1. CIVILITY

Civility—what exactly is it, and how important is it in the context of our daily lives? Civility is about participating in human interactions based on respectful, authentic, responsible, ethical, compassionate, and considerate forms of speech and behaviors. It includes a free sharing of viewpoints and ideas—agreeing, questioning, and disagreeing in a way that affirms and respects all participants. As President George Washington instructs in his book *Rules of Civility and Decent Behavior in Company and Conversation*, “Every action done in company ought to be with some sign of respect to those that are present.”

Each of us is a steward of civility. It is we who keep civility present in the conversations we have with others, in our encounters with all those who cross our path. Deborah King, an internationally recognized civility expert and founder of Final Touch shares that, “Civility knows no boundaries. It speaks every language, crosses every time zone, thrives in every culture, connects with every generation, is available to every person, and improves every situation.” Clearly, like the “butterfly effect,” our words and actions extend out into the larger world, positively or negatively impacting all that they touch.

Although the results of research, surveys and polls indicate that society as a whole believes that we have reached unprecedented levels of incivility—including how the web and mobile devices have created a civil-free zone—be assured that civility is not dead! When we choose to share words, stories, photos and posts that uplift and encourage our local and world family, we contribute to keeping civility vibrant, alive.

When it comes to ethical speech and action, civility is about choosing to be mindfully respectful about how our communication and behaviors affect others regarding themselves, their culture, their politics, and their religion. It’s about a shared level of empathy with our global brothers and sisters that metaphorically takes their hands in ours so that together we can build bridges of respect, compassion, and a common ground of unity.

As President Barack Obama reminded us when speaking at the memorial service after the tragic Tucson, Arizona shootings, “It’s important for us to pause for a moment and make sure that we are talking with each other in a way that heals, not a way that wounds We may not be able to stop all evil in the world, but I know that how we treat one another is entirely up to us.” (*cont.*)



“Civility isn’t just some optional value in a multicultural, multistate democratic republic. Civility is the key to civilization.”

- Van Jones

A Self-Reflection Exercise on the Practice of Civility

You may find it beneficial to journal your responses to the self-reflection exercise which appears immediately after each of the three pillars, and to occasionally revisit them to observe how they evolve.

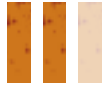
- How strongly does my societal and cultural conditioning impact my points of view?
- Am I open to hearing the opinions and beliefs of others?
- Do I think before I speak, considering the affect it will have upon others?
- Am I as willing to listen as I am to speak?
- When disagreeing with someone, am I respectful? If not, do I apologize?
- Do I catch myself when I’m in over-reactivity and reverse my course?
- Do I treat people of cultures different than my own with dignity and respect?
- Does my personal social circle include a diversity of individuals?
- Do I use the internet and social media conscientiously, ethically?
- When watching the news, do I select only networks that support my political views, or do I also check in on networks with opposite points of view?

2. DEEP LISTENING

If there's anything we need more of in today's civic and political engagements it's fewer disrespectful shouting matches. In a time when our world is experiencing an escalated sense of political polarization and alienation—whether it's through rival cable news programs, Facebook posts, personal blogs or other forms of social media—we are forced to focus more on what divides us rather than what unifies us. Deep listening is the antidote for this humanity-wide epidemic.

The truth is, we can't fake listening, and especially deep listening, because it requires we be fully present so that we may listen below the surface of a person's words and grasp from where they are coming. When we do so, then instead of judging, mocking, interrupting, yelling, interpreting or talking over persons with whom we disagree, we respectfully listen across the aisles of diversity and difference.

Deep listening calls on us to develop a heart of open-mindedness, receptivity, patience, generosity, empathy, compassion, suspending opinions, judgments, and beliefs—all qualities which result in a clearer understanding of all sides of an issue. When we sense we are being deeply listened to, we incline more towards calmly sharing and debating our differing values and beliefs without placing labels such as ignorant, bigoted, or mean-spirited upon those with whom we disagree. Deeply listening to another's perspective broadens our own. We can then begin to envision the possibility of working together to restore civility and respect, as reflected in these encouraging words spoken by Buddhist monk Thich Nhat Hanh: "After the practices of deep listening and loving speech have dissolved bitterness, fear and prejudice, people can begin to communicate with each other. Then reaching peace will be much easier. Peace will become a reality." (*cont.*) Deep listening is a transformative practice which leads to actions that result in more



After the practices of deep listening and loving speech have dissolved bitterness, fear and prejudice, people can begin to communicate with each other. Then reaching peace will be much easier. Peace will become a reality. -Thich Nhat Hann

peaceful negotiations, resolutions and solutions. It is a process that involves an intention to remain fully present with genuine interest in and appreciation of our fellow beings. Deep listening across differences, ideologies and identities inspires a culture of communication that allows individuals to work together respectfully, even when they disagree. As Margaret Wheatley reminds us, "I have learned that when we begin listening to each other...the world begins to change."

A Self Reflection Exercise on the Practice of Deep Listening

- Were there any areas in which I felt stretched beyond my comfort zone when reading about deep listening?
- What do I experience as the indicators that someone is deeply listening to me?
- When others are speaking, how do I demonstrate to them that I am fully present to what they are saying?
- In a face-to-face conversation, do I find myself thinking about something other than what the other person is sharing?
- When listening to others, do I find myself frequently distracted or impatiently waiting for my turn to speak?
- What is my understanding about listening to others for the sake of listening itself, rather than for the sake of replying?
- Do I recognize that deep listening is a form of heartfelt hospitality I extend to others by being fully present to them?
- Am I easily distracted from listening by the dings and tweets from my cell phone?
- In what aspects of my life am I aware that I do not practice deep listening?





3. AUTHENTIC COMPASSIONATE CONVERSATION

Conversation matters. So, let's talk! There is no substitute for person-to-person conversations which, in fact, have been taking place for as long as human beings have been inhabiting the planet. And when those conversations are authentic, they provide the greatest potential for going beyond the borders of our own value systems, for overcoming fear-filled social conditioning and actualizing conscious recognition of our interconnectedness as a global family. Regardless of how awkward it may at first feel to speak with individuals who appear to be so fundamentally different than ourselves, the courageous individuals who accepted their free trip to Egypt provided factual evidence that connecting through authentic conversation offers its participants the opportunity to raise the decibel level of the truth that we human beings are more alike than the differences that separate us. Equally important is that authentic conversation has the potential to stimulate civility, deep listening, and nonviolent communication.

Authentic conversation contains a compassionate, intelligent energy that can catapult us across the fault lines running between the world's cultures, politics, and religions that we allow to separate us. Our willingness to expand how we individually identify and accept that we share a common humanity with all beings is the panacea to the illusion of separation. In her epilogue, "How Can We Talk It Through?", which appears in Juanita Brown's book *The World Café: Shaping Our Future Through Conversations That Matter*, Anne W. Doshier writes, "Conversation is a profound action that helps us to expand our consciousness and connect together parts and people that are separated. I can't think of anything else that does that. It is one of our unique human paths to fulfillment and wholeness."

As world history testifies, change continues to be born through conversations that take place from within worldwide government headquarters to living rooms, salons, saloons, cafes, dog parks and golf courses. Because the art of authentic conversation influences us both as individuals and as a world community, new understandings, deeper appreciation, respect, and insights into new possibilities emerge. Authentic conversations lead to appreciating and honoring diversity, resolving conflicts, lifting us out of polarization and unifying our path into co-creating the future. *(cont.)*



A Self-Reflective Exercise on Authentic, compassionate Conversation

- What have I learned about the pillar of authentic conversation?
- What specific qualities would improve the quality of my conversational skills?
- Do I prefer conversing with people who, for the most part, agree with me, or am I equally willing to talk or debate with persons who have diverse opinions?
- Do I find myself talking more than listening?
- Do I practice deep listening in order to authentically respond to what is being shared?
- When I must respond to a question or type of behavior that could trigger hurt feelings, strong resistance or retaliation, do I think before I speak and do my best to respond calmly, respectfully, empathically?
- Do I speak with others the way I would like to be spoken to?
- Do I have most of my conversations on social media?
- Do I express myself differently on social media than in face-to-face conversation?
- Am I equally civil, listening deeply, and speaking authentically when communicating on social media and in person?

Authentic conversation begins with: being fully present and taking a genuine interest in what another person is sharing; applying deep listening so that we may more accurately understand another person's perspective; pausing long enough to take our emotional temperature so that we may offer a respectful response; letting a person know he/she has been heard; asking clarifying questions; and expressing appreciation for the conversation.



Now that you have had the opportunity to contemplate and embody the significance of the three pillars of the #PledgeToListen, you now are invited to consider taking the Pledge. But before you turn this page, we invite you to pause and reflect on the significance of making a pledge.

The word “pledge” comes to us from the Medieval Latin *plebio*, meaning “I pledge,” and also the Proto-Germanic *plehana*, which means “to care about.” As a noun, a pledge is a sincere promise; as a verb, it is the act of committing to doing something. When applied to #PledgeToListen, it’s about setting an intention to practice its heart-centered pillars in everyday life through civility, deep listening, and authentic conversation with all beings with whom we share the planet.

It is important to also remind ourselves that even with the highest of intentions there will be times when old preconditioned patterns of speech and behavior may overtake us. Our work is to then take responsibility without berating or alienating ourselves from ourselves. Instead, we can call upon our pledge, gently and compassionately directing its practice to ourselves, which creates the conditions for extending it to others.

Continue to the next page to read and consider accepting your invitation to take the #PledgeToListen.

I pledge to listen to you.

Will you listen to me?

I pledge not to demonize anyone who holds certain opinions, views or beliefs. Instead, I will try to understand their reasons and their arguments, and express my own views in return.

That's it! Thank you for taking the [**#PledgeToListen**](#). We now invite you to join our online community and turn that pledge into action. Research suggests that a group with a singular goal will achieve more than one person alone. By joining the #PledgeToListen Facebook group, you are making a commitment to yourself to continue to actively work to bring more listening to the world, and you are becoming an important part of a positive community of change-makers.

The #PledgeToListen Facebook group is a place to celebrate that which unites us in our shared humanity. It's a place to go beyond that which divides us. It's a place to share tips, support, and advice for practicing Civility, Deep Listening, and Authentic Conversation in our daily lives. And it's a place to share inspiration, brainstorm through challenges, provide mutual accountability, and celebrate successes.

Join the conversation at [**www.facebook.com/groups/PledgeToListen**](http://www.facebook.com/groups/PledgeToListen)

Join the [**#PledgeToListen**](#)





FREE TRIP TO EGYPT is an indisputably inspiring film! It inspired John Raatz, Chief FTTE Marketing and Distribution Strategist, to conceive of a side project using music to support the public release of FTTE. John reached out to his friend, singer/songwriter, Jason Karaban to write a theme song addressing the vision and values of the film's story. After watching the film, an equally inspired and enthusiastic Jason, and songwriting partner, Glen Philipps, wrote "Look Me In The Eye," a soul-stirring testament to our common humanity.



Join the [#PledgeToListen](#)

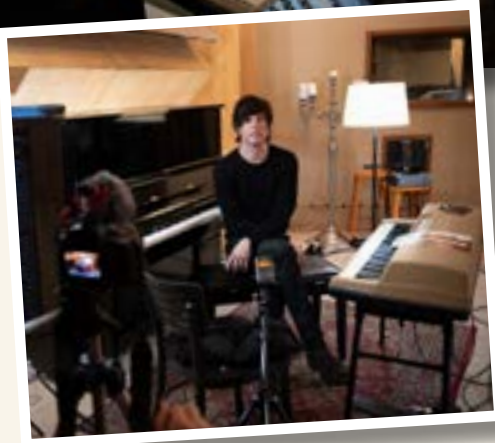


Hail, The Band's All Here!

The “Free Trip To Egypt” band after recording “Look Me In The Eye.”

Val McCallum, Guitar (Jackson Browne), Justin Stanley, Music Producer, Sebastian Steinberg, Bass (Fiona Apple), Jason Karaban, Singer/Songwriter, Pete Thomas, Drums (Elvis Costello), John Raatz, Project Producer, Benmont Tench, Keyboards (Tom Petty and the Heartbreakers).





Look Me In The Eye

©By Jason Karaban and Glen Phillips

There's just one sun that rises
Just one night that falls
The light will chase the darkness
And the world is as we are
We are hope and heartache
We are flesh and bone
We are all together
Trying to get home

Help me to listen to your voice
To hear the truth through all this noise

Hear me without judgment
Look me in the eye
Listen to my story
Hold me when I cry
We are not so different
As far as I can see
Strip away the fear
'Til There's only you and me

Look me in the eye now
Tell me what you see
Same stars up above
Same earth at our feet
Look me in the eye now
Tell me what you know
We are all together trying to get home

Help me to listen to your voice
To hear your truth through all this noise

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We are all together trying to get home



PEACE IS THE WAY





DISCUSSION CIRCLE GUIDELINES FOR FREE TRIP TO EGYPT

Discussion circles offer those who participate an opportunity to expand their understanding, insights, tolerance and compassion, along with cultivating skills for becoming more conscious, authentic, and respectful conversationalists and listeners. Whether a discussion circle is formed within a classroom, spiritual community, or the workplace, the guidelines described below will clarify expectations and foster an environment of mutual respect wherein participants can safely share their diverse views, ask questions, offer constructive critiques, and expand the discussion.

- Acknowledge the diversity within the circle of participants in the form of cultural, societal, familial, religious values, and life experience which results in each person bringing into the circle his/her preconditioned opinions, beliefs, and assumptions. Encourage the circle to hold this diversity with respect, trust, openness, and compassion.
- Acknowledge that all who are present are still learning and are bound to make mistakes.
- Meet the entire process with compassion for yourself and others by realizing that the group process is complex and therefore will bring up challenging feelings and reactions. If discomfort arises, express it to the group and be open to feedback.
- Maintain confidentiality so that all participants can feel safe being open and honest.
- Listen closely to what others are sharing, even when you disagree. (*cont.*)

- When commenting on something that has been shared, do so in a manner that reflects that you have paid close attention to the speaker's comments.
- When disagreeing with something that has been shared, criticize the idea, not the person who expressed it.
- Speak to rather than at another individual.
- Speak from the heart, which means taking ownership of what you share. Use words such as "I think," or "In my opinion."
- Refrain from giving an individual unsolicited advice within the group, or privately when outside the group.
- Do not interrupt or engage in a conversation with a person in the circle while others are speaking.
- Do not use technology during the group discussion.
- Respect time limitations by refraining from talking longer than the group leader has stipulated.

When participating in a discussion group, consider the wisdom in these words of Dr. Robert M. Kenny, Fellow of the Fetzer Institute and professor at the California Institute of Integral Studies: "When the group reaches a certain level of coherence, generally there's some higher level of order that comes into the room and it's very noticeable to people. It's like something has shifted. People stop fighting for airspace and there's a kind of group intuition that develops. It's almost like the group as a whole becomes a tuning fork for the inflow of wisdom."



ARTICLES AND ESSAYS

The Miracle of Giving

Adapted from Simple Truths by Kent Nerburn

Giving is a miracle that can transform the heaviest hearts. Two people, who moments before lived in separate worlds of private concerns, suddenly meet each other over a simple act of sharing. The world expands, a moment of goodness is created, and something new comes into being where before there was nothing.

Too often we are blind to this everyday miracle. We build our lives around acquisition and accumulation – of money, of possessions, of status. Without thinking, we begin to see giving as an economic exchange – a subtracting of something from who and what we are – and we weigh it on the scales of self-interest.

But true giving is not an economic exchange; it is a generative act. It does not subtract from what we have; it multiplies the effect we can have in the world. It is easy to think of giving only in terms of grand gestures. But this blinds us to the simple openings of the heart that can be practiced anywhere with almost anyone.

We can say hello to someone everybody ignores. We can offer help to a neighbor. We can buy a bouquet of flowers and take it to a nursing home, or spend an extra minute talking to someone who needs our time. We can take ten dollars out of our pocket and give it to someone on the street. No praise, no hushed tones of holy generosity. Just give, smile, and walk away.

If you perform these simple acts, little by little you will start to understand the miracle of giving. You will begin to see the unprotected human heart and the honest smiles of human happiness. You will start to feel what is common among us, not what separates and differentiates us.

Before long you will discover that you have the power to create joy and happiness by your simplest gestures of caring and compassion. You will see that you have the power to unlock the goodness in people's hearts by sharing the goodness in yours.

Most of all, you will find the other givers. No matter where you live or where you travel, whether you speak their language or know their names, you will know them by their small acts, and they will recognize you by yours. You will become part of the community of humanity that trusts and shares and dares to reveal the softness of its heart. Once you become a giver, you will never be alone.

To Listen & Love

Rabbi Rami Shapiro

There is a moment in *A Free Trip to Egypt* when Katie sobbingly shares her suffering with a Muslim friend and her friend's mother. There is genuine love in that encounter sparked by a special kind of listening that took all three women beyond race, religion, ethnicity and culture to an unscripted meeting between unlabeled human beings.

In the Hebrew Bible this quality of listening is implied in the phrase: *Sh'ma Yisrael Adonai Eloheinu Adonai Echad. Ve-ahavta et Adonai Elohecha*: "Listen Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one. And you shall love the Lord your God" (Deuteronomy 6:4-5). To understand the deeper meaning of these words and the true power of listening to generate love, let's unpack the Hebrew to reveal meanings the conventional English translation fails to reveal.

SH'MA/Listen The quality of listening called for here is to listen in such a way as to realize the interconnectedness of all life. We achieve this quality of listening when we allow our ears to take in all the sounds around us without inviting the mind to label or judge them. Listening attentively at this moment I hear the creaking of my house, the tumbling of my clothes dryer, the various tweets of the numerous birds who are my closest neighbors, the distant barking of dogs and the slamming of a nearby car door. Writing about this I distinguish one sound from another, but in the act of listening I make no such distinctions. And the more I listen the less I am aware of being the listener. There is just listening. This is the listening that reveals the unity.

YISRAEL/Israel While commonly used to refer to the People Israel, the Hebrew word *Yisrael* literally means One Who Wrestles with God. Wrestling with God is the act of making sense and meaning out of the wildness of life. In this sense we are all Godwrestlers, we are all *Yisrael*. Certainly this was true of Katie and her comforters wrestling as they did with the pain and suffering Katie shared.

ADONAI ELOHEINU/Y-H-V-H Our God *Adonai*, Lord, is a rabbinic euphemism for *Y-H-V-H* the unpronounceable Hebrew Name of God. Sadly the euphemism obscures the meaning of the very Name it is supposed to represent. Where *Adonai* is a noun, *Y-H-V-H* is a verb; where *Adonai* establishes hierarchy, *Y-H-V-H* promotes holarchy, integration and interdependence; where *Adonai* is about power, *Y-H-V-H* is about empowering. (*cont.*)

To Listen & Love, Rabbi Rami Shapiro

Y-H-V-H is the future imperfect form of the Hebrew verb “to be” and is better translated not as “Lord” but as Happening. Identifying Y-H-V-H as “our God” (Eloheinu) frees us from all theology since theology reduces God to a noun, an object to be worshipped, while Y-H-V-H is a verb to be experienced. Identifying God as Y-H-V-H frees us from the notion that God is a being or even a Supreme Being, and reminds us that God is Y-H-VH: Be-ing itself, the process of happening manifesting all reality. God as Y-H-V-H puts an end to arguments as to whether or not God exists by revealing that God is existing itself.

Y-H-V-H ECHAD/Y-H-V-H is One Y-H-V-H is the Happening of all reality the way an ocean is waving of every wave, and just as there is no separation between ocean and wave, so there is no separation between God and reality. This is what St. Paul is teaching us when he says God is that reality “in whom we live and move and have our being” (Acts 17:28). God is everything: Y-H-V-H Echad. The realization of the fundamental unity of all life in, with, and as God gives rise to a universal moral code: justice and compassion for all beings or as Genesis 12:3 puts it, being “a blessing to all the families of the earth” human and otherwise.

VE-AHAVTA/And You Shall Love Can love be commanded? Of course not; authentic love arises out of the moment and cannot be imposed on the moment. Because this is so, “You shall Love Y-H-V-H your God” isn’t a command but an axiom: When you listen to the unity of Y-H-V-H manifesting as all reality, you shall love that reality with, as the verse goes on to say, “all your heart, all your breath, and all your being.” The text is not commanding you to love. Rather, it is pointing out that if you listen deeply and experience the absolute unity of God, then you will be filled with love for God and that manifesting of God we call Creation.

This is the listening/loving demonstrated by Katie and her Muslim comforters. The mother and daughter listened to Katie’s suffering and could only feel love for Katie herself. Something very different happens with Jason and Jenna when they visit the Zarritual later in the film. Zar is a healing ritual originating in North Africa and gaining popularity in urban Muslim centers such as Cairo. Jason and Jenna didn’t listen to the healing message of Zar. On the contrary, they saw it as alien, frightening and strange. They called it satanic and labeled the practitioners “satanic worshippers” (1:12:13).

Unlike the mother and daughter who listened and loved, Jenna and Jason fled and feared, and prayed to Jesus to protect themselves and everyone watching this film from the satanic power of Zar. Jenna prays for Jesus to enter the hearts of the Zar practitioners and awaken them to the truth, by which she means her truth.

Jenna ends her prayer saying, “we are so free in you God,” but is she free? Someone who is free is capable of listening without bias, capable of seeing what is really (cont.)

To Listen & Love, Rabbi Rami Shapiro

happening as this North African healing ceremony unfolds rather than imposing her own fear-laced drama over it. Jenna and Jason are not free, they are afraid. Where the Bible challenges us to love the stranger as yourself (Deuteronomy 10:9), meaning to listen so deeply to the other as to realize that they too are Y-H-V-H, they flee the strange, fear the stranger, and label what they chose not to understand “satanic”.

The listening to which we are called, the listening that manifests as loving, knows no others, but sees all beings—human and otherwise, neighbors and strangers—as Y-H-VH. And with this revelation comes love and not fear.

A Free Trip to Egypt does a wonderful job of illustrating the human capacity for love and fear, and makes it a movie worthy of our time and attention.

“Laughter is the shortest distance
between two people.” ~Victor Borge

Hearty Laughter --

A Heart-to-Heart Connection That Builds Bridges, By Steve Bhaerman

Victor Borge should know. For years, the musician-comedian was a one-man international ambassador for laughter and goodwill. More recently, physician-turned-clown Patch Adams has toured the world with his clown posse “speaking” the language that transcends language, silent physical comedy. In 2013, comic Gabriel Iglesias (aka “Fluffy”) had a breakthrough trip to Saudi Arabia, where despite the cultural restrictions, his kind yet edgy comedy was a huge hit.

And ... sometimes the power of humor can be anything but “fluffy.”

Economist John Kenneth Galbraith tells about a group of American and Soviet economists meeting to discuss trade possibilities at the time of the Cuban missile crisis. When news of the missile crisis hit, everything stopped, and there was tremendous tension in the room. Finally, a Soviet delegate timidly raised his hand and suggested they go around and tell jokes. He volunteered to start: “What’s the difference between capitalism and communism?”

“In capitalism, man exploits man. In communism, it’s the other way around.”

The room erupted in laughter, the tension was broken and they were able to continue the meeting because “levity” uplifted them enough to see from a higher perspective.

As a comedian, I have taken that story to heart, and have dedicated my work to building bridges through humor. That’s tricky, because humor is necessarily edgy and “too nice” just isn’t funny. The trick is to point the audience -- regardless of which “side” they identify with -- toward some universal truth or foible we humans share, and do it in a way that deconstructs ideas that need to be deconstructed while “leaving people standing.”

In 2009, I had the privilege of performing comedy at an event called the Transpartisan Citizens Summit. As the name suggests, every political viewpoint was represented in the room, from left-wing progressives, to gun-toting militia folks from Idaho and everyone in between. I walked out to do my set, and after an innocuous opener, I announced, “I have been asked to not do any controversial political material ... (pause) ... so you’ve been a WONDERFUL AUDIENCE, GOODNIGHT! (cont.)

Hearty Laughter by Steve Bhaerman

The place broke into laughter, and of course I was able to do all the material I wanted to do, and the audience stayed with me. Interestingly -- even though the bulk of my material suggested I was part of the “progressive” tribe -- the people I had the strongest heart-to-heart connection with were the militia people from Idaho.

Go figure.

Upon reflection, it was probably because I stood for my own principles AND respected them because they did the same. And ... because we experienced the joy and camaraderie of laughing together.

Political humor has become polarizing and confrontational, but it doesn't have to be, particularly if we address the one paradox that everyone seems to ignore. Yes, we are polarized -- and yet the overwhelming majority of Americans agree the system isn't working. Consequently, I have found a joke that always works: “We have a deeply divided body politic in America. Half the people believe our system is broken. The other half believes it is fixed.”

After all, it is the “job” of humor to play with paradox and magically integrate contradictions. We laugh in surprise and delight at a joke because it is as if a puzzle is being revealed. Brain scientist Scott Weems says we get the same dopamine rush (a good thing) when we hear the punchline to a joke that we get when we solve a problem.

So maybe the magic of humor can simultaneously bring people together in laughter, and then in the wake of the “ha-ha” there can be an “aha” -- an insight that can lead to a creative solution. Done the right way, humor can heal the heart and free the mind.

Here are a few guidelines for cultivating humor that builds bridges instead of blowing them up:

1. Make sure your heart is in the right place. If you've ever met someone whose “humor” is thinly-veiled aggression, you know what I mean. So before trying something funny, check your audience and check your intention.
2. Self-facing humor works best. Poking fun at yourself -- provided you are being as kind to yourself as you would to another -- breaks down defenses. Abraham Lincoln was a master at this. When a debate opponent called him “two-faced”, Lincoln protested, “If I had two faces, would I be using this one?” (*cont.*)

Hearty Laughter by Steve Bhaerman

3. Commit random acts of comedy. That means, have your humorous spirit “at the ready” to break tension, cheer people up, and create a sense of playfulness. You don’t have to be a professional comedian to lift spirits in a playful way. The weekend after 9/11, my wife Trudy and I were on our way to a conference that should have been cancelled. We were at the Denver airport and the atmosphere was grim -- armed soldiers, and shocked and depressed passengers. At one point a man with a doggie carrying case put the case down and unzipped it so the dog could poke his head out for some air. Trudy walked up to the dog and asked, “Did you pack your own things today? Did any stranger give you anything?” The dog just looked at Trudy and wagged his tail. Everyone within earshot laughed with great relief because the joke was not about the tragedy itself, but about a peripheral situation. It was a healing act.

In delicate situations -- as the movie demonstrates -- civility matters, as does listening deeply and compassionately. And ... in sharing the joys of life, like food, camaraderie and laughter, we create true, deep and long-lasting bonds that remind us we are all one family. After all, a family who plays together stays together.

Steve Bhaerman is an author and comedian who has spent the past 30 years performing cosmic comedy in the guise of Swami Beyondananda. He also coaches and consults with others to help them add humorous wisdom to their content. He can be found online at <https://www.wakeuplaughing.com/>



Appendices

Appendix A

Interview with Tarek Mounib



The following interview with film creator Tarek Mounib took place in 2017, after completing the filming of *Free Trip to Egypt*. The interview was conducted by Ingrid Serban, director of the film.

*Ingrid Serban: Nearly a year has gone by since you filmed *Free Trip to Egypt*. In looking back to the birthing process of the film, you described it as an inner calling to explore if bringing people of diverse cultures into face-to-face contact and conversation could result in shifting preconceived prejudices and judgments. What were your observations as you progressed through the interviews and eventually brought the Americans and Egyptians together?*

Tarek Mounib: At the outset of making the film, it was about trusting the unknown, beginning with not knowing if we could even get any Americans to take the trip! Then, when 7 brave individuals agreed to go, how could you predict, for example, how a devoted Christian evangelist would interact with a Muslim who is equally devoted to his orthodox practice of Islam? Will they argue, and will arguing escalate into aggression? The truth is, they got along just fine. Actually, I was the one who debated far more passionately with the evangelical Christian than the orthodox Muslim, which caused me to examine my own intolerance. Considering one of my primary intentions was to explore if it were possible for people with very different beliefs and views to come together by connecting at a human level, then yes, I'd say the film and those who participated in it showed that it is possible and that the magic that can occur through a genuine human connection can go beyond any expectations.

IS: What do you see as the most beneficial impact the film can potentially have on the world in, say, over the next five to ten years?

TM: I think the film can take people on the same journey that we went on, or at least I hope it will. We all started out with our preconditioned opinions and prejudices and returned home feeling that we had changed in a positive way. We all felt more connected to the people around us and saw the world in a different light. People who watch the film will be able to see, hear, and feel this for themselves. So, to answer your question, as long as this film is around, it will be an example of what can happen when there is a willingness to explore and discover the healing power of human connection. (*cont.*)

IS: Do you think you and your film can succeed in building bridges of understanding when the leaders of the world's governments and the United Nations have not yet been able to do so?

TM: Well, I don't consider myself to be a person with a plan for bringing about world peace. I just follow what I feel inspired to do as far as contributing some positivity to our global society. I'm not quite yet arrogant enough to label myself as the next Gandhi, Dr. Martin Luther King, the Dalai Lama or Nelson Mandela! I'm just doing my small part with the hope that it has a positive impact on the world.

IS: I'm not going to let you off quite that easy! I remember speaking with you when you said that this project chose you as much as you chose it. Do you still feel that way?

TM: I believe artists catch a creative inspiration they intuitively recognize as not being their personal idea, that they are simply the delivery system for its manifestation in the world. That's what I felt at every step of the film. I didn't feel it was "my" project in a possessive sense. I just knew it caught me, that I fell in love with it and set the intention to move it forward. Then all these amazing individuals joined the team, which was far beyond anything I could have engineered.

IS: When we were on the road trip filming people in different states, were you surprised at the responses you got from those you interviewed?

TM: I'm happy to say that the responses I received to the interview questions renewed my faith in humanity! Most people were welcoming, kind, open, and expressed appreciation for the ideal of building cultural bridges. That being said, when we were at the Trump campaign rally in Louisville, Kentucky and I began interviewing people on the street, this is when I encountered the most extreme views like, "We need to ship all the Muslims out of our country!" I felt this and similar statements were grounded in societally programmed fear. When I began talking one-on-one to those who expressed such views, I could still feel our common humanity. So when people who didn't know I was a Muslim said they wanted to kill Muslims, I was no longer afraid; I could feel empathy for them. (*cont.*)

IS: Once the 7 individuals accepted your invitation to travel to Egypt, what was your process for determining the Egyptian families with whom they would be matched?

TM: When I was conducting the search for Egyptian families, I took very seriously my responsibility to select those I knew to be trustworthy, hospitable, and who would take a sincere, personal interest in connecting with the Americans they would be hosting in their homes. As well, I wanted to be sure that the Egyptians and Americans I put together had views that were as diverse as possible—from the most liberal to the most religious and everything in between. After all, exploring how people of diversity could discover their interconnectedness is at the heart of the film.

IS: So how has the film personally affected you?

TM: For one thing, it confirmed that a person doesn't have to be perfect to do good in the world. I used to think that you have to be a living example of what you aspire to achieve—otherwise, you're a hypocrite. Then I realized that I didn't have to wait until I was a perfect example of my highest ideals as long as I was coming from a sincere heart and putting my aspirations into action. By making the film, I became more engaged with the larger world in a very tangible, meaningful way. My awareness of what I want to continue doing with my life expanded, solidified.

IS: And what is it that you would like to continue doing?

TM: I'd like to create more projects that contribute to positive change in the world, because through doing the film I realized it was about far more than a project. It was a deeply personal experience for me to connect with the crew, every American who took the trip, and their Egyptian hosts. It was about the friendships that were formed through connecting heart-to-heart.

IS: Would you say, then, that your overall vision and mission for the film were successfully accomplished?

TM: Absolutely! The deep, magical connections that were made among all the Americans and the Egyptians who participated revealed humanity's potential to live as a global family in peace and harmony, respectfully honoring the dignity of all humankind. Connection. It's all about our interconnectedness.



Appendix B

Interview with Ingrid Serban



The following interview with film director Ingrid Serban took place in 2019, just prior to the theatrical release of *Free Trip to Egypt*. The interview was conducted by Sylvia Desrochers, publicist for the film.

Sylvia Desrochers: Can you tell us a little about how you came to get involved in the film?

Ingrid Serban: A friend of mine introduced me to Tarek because she thought I would be a good fit for directing his film, *Free Trip to Egypt*. “You have to talk to Ingrid,” she told him, and followed up with an introductory email to us both. Tarek and I spoke by phone soon after the email exchange and decided to meet in person to discuss the steps needed to make his inspiring idea into a movie.

SD: Prior to this film, did you have a lot of experience with traveling to other countries and meeting people of diverse cultures?

IS: I was born in Europe and moved to California to attend school, so I have a somewhat culturally diverse background. I have traveled extensively within North America, Central America and Europe. This was my first time in Africa. I have a keen interest in other cultures. My curiosity constantly propels me to learn new things and meet new people.

SD: So, part of your interest in directing the film was generated by this opportunity to explore another culture?

IS: Definitely! One thing about being an avid traveler is you learn that it’s so much more about exploration than expectation. You have to keep an open mind and appreciate the adventure. That’s how I tried to approach directing *Free Trip to Egypt*.

SD: Did you and Tarek make any advance logistical plans? For example, did you know you were going to the United States to immediately begin interviewing people who would be interested in going to Egypt to be part of Tarek’s diversity experiment? Or were the Egyptian families selected first?

IS: We began our search in the US by meeting with some friends of mine in Georgia. Then we drove across the Southern states and ended up at a Trump rally being held in Louisville, Kentucky. After we talked to people at the rally and did some on-the-street impromptu interviews— (cont.)

along with an appearance on Sirius XM Radio—we found 7 Americans who were willing to travel with us to Egypt. The Egyptian hosts were either Tarek’s acquaintances, or friends of friends.

SD: Who were the most apprehensive—the Americans, or the Egyptians?

IS: Our Americans participants were a bit more nervous, understandably so. During the three months leading to the trip, I stayed in touch with them regularly, answered any questions they had, and made sure they felt that we had their best interests at heart. The concern they shared was that they would be portrayed in a negative light. The Egyptian hosts were great, and if they were nervous they didn’t show it. They were excited to share their lives and love for their country with the Americans.

SD: Would you describe for me one of your favorite scenes in the film?

IS: That’s an easy one! I’d have to say it was the connection one of the American women had with the mother of one of the Egyptian women. Every time I see it, I cry!

SD: Yes, I remember it too. It’s just incredible because you can tell that even though both women didn’t know what they were saying to each other in their respective languages, they felt it; they knew they were both speaking the common language of love. For me, this was one of the most powerful scenes in the film, one that I’m confident will be felt by viewers.

IS: Here’s a behind-the-scenes moment to add to that story. Before we brought the Americans over to Egypt, I spent a couple of weeks of pre-production in Cairo to scout for locations and to get to know our Egyptian hosts. I had gone with the Egyptian woman to her mom’s home. Within two minutes after walking in the door, I found myself in tears. The welcome and generosity of affection the mom exuded was overwhelming. (cont.)

SD: Did you have an Egyptian film crew?

IS: In the US, I had a small American crew. Before the big trip, we filmed the American participants in an effort to get to know them and to allow them to get comfortable with the camera and with me. The more we knew about each American's personal life story, the better we were able to match them with their Egyptian hosts. In Egypt, we hired an entirely local crew out of a desire to support the local film industry, and because it made sense from a logistical point of view. We hired 5 crews who followed the American and Egyptian groups wherever their activities took them.

SD: Were you watching dailies every night to see how the footage was coming along?

IS: Unfortunately, there was no time for me to do so. There were 5 cameras rolling and we were working 16-plus hours per day. Knowing that watching dailies wasn't going to be a possibility, I created a different plan. Each camera crew had one of our producers keeping an eye on the events. And before we started filming, I shared information about our American participants with the producers and the cinematographers to make it easier to capture key moments on film. Then, at the end of each day, I gathered the details, which allowed me to be aware of how their stories were progressing. I joined a different group each day so I could keep a finger on the pulse of the action. I had certain targets I was going for in terms of the story. It was a calculated risk which, for the most part, worked out well.

SD: So as the director of the film, what do you hope its viewers will take away with them?

IS: As a filmmaker, I strive to capture and relay as much truth as I can. I don't expect viewers to think a certain way after viewing this film, but I do hope they feel a connection and kinship with the American and Egyptian people and their journeys. I hope that the audience feels transported to Egypt, a place I've grown to love, and that the film inspires a desire to meet new people. For me, it's been a privilege to meet everyone who has participated in our film, both in front and behind the camera. I am forever grateful for all of their efforts, courage and relentless determination to bring this story to the screen.



Recommended
Resources



Recommended Resources

The following are recommended for those who wish to learn more about the three pillars of #PledgeToListen: Civility, Deep Listening, and Authentic Conversation.

Civility

Burgess, H. and Burgess, G. M. "The Meaning of Civility." Beyond Intractability. Conflict Information Consortium, University of Colorado, Boulder. Posted: 1997
<http://www.beyondintractability.org/essay/civility>.

Marks, John. "The American Uncivil Wars: How Crude, Rude and Obnoxious Behavior Has Replaced Good Manners and Why That Hurts Our Politics and Culture," U.S. News and World Report, 22 April 1996, 66-72.

Cronin, Barry R., "Viewpoint: The Noble Virtue of Civility," The San Diego Union Tribune, August 9, 2012. <https://www.sandiegouniontribune.com/pomeroado-news/sd-pn-viewpoint-the-noble-virtue-of-civility-2012aug09-story.html>

Forni, P.M. (2002). Choosing Civility: The Twenty-Five Rules of Considerate Conduct. New York, NY: St. Martin's Press.

Hacala, Sara. (2011). Saving Civility: 52 Ways to Tame Rude, Crude & Attitude for a Polite Planet. Woodstock, VT: SkyLight Paths Publishing.

Washington, G. ((2017). George Washington's Rules of Civility & Decent Behavior in Company and Conversation. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc. (cont.)

Deep Listening

Hanh, Thich Nhat. (2003). *Creating True Peace: Ending Violence in Yourself, Your Community, and the World*. New York, NY: Free Press.

Holland, Sarah, S. and Silvers, Beth. (2019). *I Think You're Wrong (But I'm Still Listening)*. Nashville, TN: Nelson Books.

Lewis, Dennis. "The Lost Art of Listening." 2009. www.dennislewis.org (Writings link; Articles and Essays).

Shafir, Rebecca. (2003). *The Zen of Listening: Mindful Communication in the Age of Distraction*. Wheaton, IL: Quest Books.

Papadopoulos, Nasos "How to Master the Art of Listening," The Metalearn Newsletter. www.metalearn.net/articles/how-to-master-the-art-of-listning.

The Dilenschneider Group. The "Lost Art" of Listening. www.dilenschneider.com/files/lost_art.pdf.

Authentic Conversation

Brown, Juanita. (2005). *The World Café: Shaping Our Future Through Conversations That Matter*. San Francisco, CA: Berrett-Koehler Publishers, Inc.

Manji, Irshad. (2019). *Don't Label Me: An Incredible Conversation for Divided Times*. New York, NY: St. Martin's Press.

Rosenberg, Marshall, B. (2015). *LIVING Nonviolent Communication: Practical Tools to Connect and Communicate Skillfully in Every Situation*. Boulder, CO: Sounds True, Inc.

Rosenberg, Marshall, B. (2005). *Speak Peace in a World of Conflict: What You Say Next Will Change Your World*. Encinitas, CA: PuddleDancer Press.

Sofer, Oren. (2018). *Say What You Mean: A Mindful Approach to Nonviolent Conversation*. Boulder, CO: Shambhala Publications, Inc.

Wheatley, Margaret. (2009). *Turning to One Another: Simple Conversations to Restore Hope to the Future*. San Francisco, CA: Berrett-Koehler Publishers, Inc.

About Kindness Films

With a goal of launching a sincere dialogue and a better understanding of different points of view, Kindness Films is focused on creating projects that contribute to the wellbeing of humanity and bringing people together of various backgrounds and cultures. A successful software entrepreneur of Egyptian heritage who has lived in Zurich, Switzerland for the past 15 years, founder Tarek Mounib—who recalls being the only Muslim family in his neighborhood growing up in the '70s in Halifax, Canada—launched the non-partisan production company in 2017 with the genesis of an idea: A dream to build bridges through kindness and document the journey in a film. What happened next was beyond his wildest dreams and resulted in a most unusual journey. Visit us at: www.KindnessFilms.org

Join the [#PledgeToListen](#)

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Writer: Anita Rehker

The civility of no race can be perfect
whilst another race is degraded.

It is a doctrine alike of the oldest
and of the newest philosophy, that
humanity is one,
and you cannot injure
any member, without a sympathetic
injury to all the members.

~Ralph Waldo Emerson