**Dissolving Cultural Intransigence**

**By Ron Schultz**

Within the realm of emergent phenomena, one of the most insidious combinations is prejudice and its fraternal twin, bigotry. Both arise out of the interaction between our fear and ignorance. Our inability to assimilate something being different than us or our experience of the world in which we live. Few of us are immune and many make a common practice out of it. And from that, our global society suffers under the further emergence of hatred, terror, and mistrust. It is a cycle that has continued since the dawn of what we call “consciousness.”

It is “us” versus “them” in all its dastardly permutations and ramifications. And no one is the better for it. There are so many examples in the world today emerging from our fear-based interactions. From the streets of Ferguson, MO, to the killing waging in the Middle East, to our neighborlessness on our own city streets; if it ain’t us, it’s them.

I must admit, I only began thinking about this more closely when a recent request came to give some thought to the issues of Islamophobia. Wow, that got some things going for me.

I began doing some cursory research, and because there was a local Islamic center and mosque in my suburban LA neighborhood, a grand building on a hill a few blocks from my house, I decided I’d try and find someone there with whom to speak. I was surprised to find, although in hindsight it makes perfect sense, that there was no mention or reference online to the existence of this beautiful structure or what it housed. The closest listing was for an Islamic Center about 10 miles away. So, I called them.

Then, something rather extraordinary happened. I never spoke with anyone. But as I was listening to a recording of a very foreign sounding voice outlining upcoming events and prayer services, much of it spoken in a language I couldn’t understand, I began feeling something arising in my body. It was distinct and it was obvious. It was fear.

Without warning, without cause, I felt the rapid rise of energy coursing through my body. It wasn’t anticipation. It wasn’t excitement. I was experiencing exactly what I was calling to learn more about. My journalistic distance and biases, always suspect, were now completely shattered. It was clear that in order to examine the issue, I didn’t need to speak with an authority to confirm what Islamophobia looked like or how it showed-up. I needed to look at myself.

Many years ago, Walt Kelley and his famous cartoon character, Pogo, once said, “We have met the enemy and it is us.” If just like me, others have these same feelings, then it seems pretty obvious that a deeper and more personal examination is required.

There is little question that the complexity of this problem is enormous. The deep seeded fear that emerges when we interact with “the stranger” is not only the stuff of novels and dreams, it fills our movies and TV screens. It’s shouted out by 24-hour pundits and bloggers.

Was that always the case? Was there ever a time when the stranger was welcomed. A dear friend pointed to evidence of this with the Mork and Mindy show—of course, this stranger was white and Robin Williams in all his fullness. And even though he played an alien, he was not so foreign that we couldn’t laugh along with his innocence of our culture.

There was also a time, a much younger time, when my openness to new friends, my curiosity about others was simply a part of my discovering the world around me, unprejudiced, unbiased by any outside influence. But things have changed in the world. The darkness and fear of that which is different permeates our media. Children have to be taught “stranger danger” as a normal part of growing up. Of course, as we interact with that barrage of stranger-fear, what emerges, what arises out of the muck, is even more fear. The curiosity that might allow us to view these situations differently is lost. Instead we are on-guard, reinforced, and entrenched. The unfortunate consequence of this security surfeit is a societal freeze, cultural intransigence.

Classically, the phase transition from ice to water to gas has helped folks visualize the distinctions between order, complexity and chaos. In terms of this discussion, when the conversation and attitudes are frozen, nothing fresh emerges. It is only after the thaw, within the watery pool of complexity, where the elements can move freely still within a bounded space, that any innovative interactions take place. This is the spawning pond, out of which something new and novel can emerge.

Cultural intransigence is that frozen state. Finding the solvent to dissolve both our personal and cultural solidity, and then translating that to a world stained by intransigence, is the challenge of this age. But how do we transform cultural fear without creating more and future aggression?

In the most recent report of the Organization for Islamic Cooperation’s (OIC) publication, *Observatory*, covering October 2012 to September 2013, there is documentation of incidents in 18 nations involving attacks on mosques, desecration of Muslim graves, political and social campaigns against Islam and Muslims, intolerance directed against Islam and its sacred symbols, discrimination against Muslims in educational institutions, workplaces and airports, and other related phenomena.

As Richard Reoch, a former senior executive at Amnesty International explained it: “These incidents not only target Islam. They are part of a larger and deeply disturbing tendency worldwide to denigrate, demonize and unleash assaults, often with extreme cruelty, on entire groups of people, victimizing them for their identity. Like all forms of religious, ethnic or cultural hatred, what is happening is a direct threat to the principles of coexistence that are essential if people of different faiths and traditions are to live and flourish together.

I believe a deep-seated approach is needed to understand and heal what is happening across the globe. It will not end simply by denouncing it and seeking to suppress it. It will continue to burn. If there is to be an effective international roadmap for constructive action, it needs to be grounded in a far more profound dialogue, based on the enduring, noble and transcendent values of our respective traditions.”

Creating such opportunities may seem unimaginable, but our failure of imagination is simply our inability to see beyond our own fear and trepidation. Since its inception, this column has been called *Adjacent Opportunities*, openly stolen from Philip Kauffman’s *adjacent possible*. The notion is that the adjacent opportunity is just one step away, but doesn’t emerge and become available until we have taken the step before it.

Nothing is closer than an adjacency and we live in an adjacent world. This is why we can’t allow our perception of separateness to prevail. But just like me, it arises.

The answer is often, “let us build bridges between.” But the separation isn’t that vast. It’s just one step away. It’s not necessary to transit this divide by leaping over a vast chasm, but rather by unceasingly engaging the adjacent interaction, having the dialogue, and deepening it by capturing each successive new opportunity we make, and moving forward from that point.

The simplicity of one step is deceptive. With every new step comes the possibility of a new understanding, which when internalized opens up the next, new opportunity.

What our experience shows us is the impossible and inconceivable become manifest whenever we willingly dissolve our frozen thinking, allow for new combinations to occur, and keep from refreezing what emerges. Shifting cultural intransigence is neither impossible nor inconceivable. It requires fearlessness and curiosity to welcome the stranger and create community. It also means not only recognizing our own fear, but the fear of the stranger, as well.

Our differences are our own making. Solidifying them is our own doing. Unmaking and dissolving them begins with each successive step forward. I realize, now, I need to take those steps, too. Can we walk together?