



BOOK of LOVE

Checking out the Human Library

Curiosity about other religions wasn't exactly encouraged during my Catholic upbringing. Through the years, I've studied other faiths—Islam, Judaism, Buddhism. But Baha'i? No clue.

Luckily, my ignorance wasn't a problem for Ajit Giani and Ata Tabibzadegan, members of The Houston Baha'i (bah-high) Center, who patiently explained to me the basic tenets of their faith.

"Baha'i is not a separate religion," said Giani. "We promote the unity of all religions so that, together, we can practice our common beliefs: kindness, love, harmony, equality."

When you become Baha'i, added Tabibzadegan, you keep your individual religious beliefs. "But you come to realize that your religion is just one chapter of a bigger book."

This was an apt description, given that both gentlemen were "books" I'd checked out as part of a Human Library event here in Houston.

An international organization based in Copenhagen, the Human Library began in 2000 with a lofty goal: to create positive environments that allow people to challenge prejudice and stereotypes through dialogue. Today, organizers hold events in

cities around the globe. In 2009, Houston became the second city in the U.S. (after San Diego) to sponsor one, staging it downtown at the Jesse H. Jones Building.

At Lone Star College in Kingwood, a highly successful Human Library gathering is now held twice a year. John Theis, director of the college's Center for Civic Engagement, said it was part of an effort to counter the lack of civil discourse he was witnessing, not only on campus but in society.

"To live in a democracy," said Theis, "we need to be able to talk to each other in a reasonable, calm way, no matter our differences. It's only when we can talk about why we think the way we do that we can find ways to work on the problems in our communities."

For each Human Library event, Theis and his team recruit volunteers from various disciplines, religions, careers and lifestyles to serve as human books. These are then checked out by "readers"—the students—for discussion.

The books available to the 500 students who participated in a recent lively event at the school's Student Conference Center ranged from police officers, a veteran, and a single mother to a non-profit professional, a Muslim, and an atheist.

"This is my third time," said the atheist book. "I thought I'd be sitting around most of the day, but I barely checked back in before getting checked out again."

What kinds of questions was she fielding? "Most of the students I talk to have already left organized religion and are wondering what's beyond that," she said. "I'm not here to change anybody's mind, just answer questions."

Other books nodded in agreement. One was Cherry Steinwender, executive director of The Center for the Healing of Racism. An African-American woman married to a white Austrian man for 36 years, she was talking to students about interracial relationships.

"Being a married couple in Houston decades ago, my husband and I had a lot of walls to break down," she admitted. "I talk to students who are in cross-cultural or interracial relationships—or those who want to be. Once, I even got checked out by a teacher."

As Theis stood amid the books and readers, all engaged in enlightening discussion, it was clear he was happy with the event's success. "We're working on expanding them to other campuses next year, specifically in Montgomery and University Park," he said, before getting pulled aside.

Not surprisingly at the Human Library, someone had a question.

Want to organize a Human Library at your church, institution or business? Visit humanlibrary.org for details and an application.

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