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## THE GIFTS OF PLURALISM

BY DAVID NELSON

Recently, I attended my first Muslim funeral and burial. The life we were celebrating was that of a leading physician in our community; his wife is a precious colleague of mine in my coaching and consulting work.

We were together in the midst of a community's loss. Men and women from a variety of religious traditions gathered to support the family and celebrate the legacy of our friend.

I was moved by the participation of the family and many friends, as I was welcomed into this most sacred moment in another religion's life. I had never witnessed the passing of the body wrapped in the shroud worn in the pilgrimage to Mecca. I watched my friend's adult children climb down into the grave and place his body in the ground. We all tossed in the dirt. People stayed at the grave as it was filled and the burial was complete. The man had returned from his Hajj just a day before his life ended. He had prayer with his two younger children, both in elementary school, on Sunday morning just hours before he died. His family felt he was in a very good space and time in his life and, even in the midst of their grief, they were able to celebrate fully.

Sharing in the event of his burial made me even more proud of my community's vision to be the "most welcoming community" in the world for all people. We live in a pluralistic world. We do not have to travel to far away places to interact with people who look, eat, speak, celebrate, and live in different ways.

In your practices, you welcome people from a rich variety of backgrounds, and each patient brings traditions and beliefs with them. Diversity is not a problem to be solved or a challenge to be mastered. Diversity is a gift to be savored. Interfaith interaction begins in our workplaces and neighborhoods and extends to the broader community. We can model in small communities what we all long for in the global community.

Mahatma Gandhi, the great political leader of India during the middle of the 20th century, once wrote, "I can see clearly the time coming when people belonging to different faiths will have the same regard for others' faiths as they have for their own." I also can see that day clearly. I really like the evolutionary progression from "tolerance" to "respect" to "appreciation." It is the law that I tolerate those who are different than I am. We can move from tolerance to respect,



holding in high regard another's right to believe and practice a religion. We can fully appreciate the other person and his or her spirituality. Appreciation means adding value to them by honoring their core values and religion.

"Spiritual Intelligence" is the ability to address and solve the problems of meaning and value. It is the intelligence with which we can place our actions and our lives in a wider, richer, meaning-giving context. There are several indicators of Spiritual Intelligence. These include the capacity to be flexible, a high degree of self-awareness, and the capacity to face and use suffering. Spiritual Intelligence also includes an interest in others and a desire to listen and learn about the wonderful mysteries that give meaning to them.

The dental office is a place where we interact in pursuit of good physical health. It is not a church, synagogue, or mosque. It should not be seen as a place for the practice of religion. But it's important to me to know that you, as members of the human family, value me not only as a patient, but also as a human being, a person of faith. It is a place for respectful listening and appreciative conversations. Many of your offices employ a rich variety of people. At times, this means you honor diverse holidays and various religious practices.

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**“... to be free is not merely to cast off one's chains, but to live in a way that respects and enhances the freedom of others.”**

**- Nelson Mandela**

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Research indicates that people do their best work when they are appreciated not only for what they do but for who they are. Recent Gallup studies have demonstrated the single most important factor in employee excellence and long tenure is respect from the direct supervisor for the employee's work and personal reality.

Celebrating the gifts of pluralism is good for your employees, patients, and vendors. The gift of pluralism is what makes your space a welcoming place, which, in my thinking, makes it a sacred space.

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