What about your life story would help you identify as an interfaith leader? The remainder of this chapter presents a simple structure for highlighting and connecting life experiences in a manner that adds up to seeing yourself as an interfaith leader. I will illustrate the various “moments” by telling how the stories of other interfaith leaders influenced their vocation. I hope that by telling their stories, you will be able to locate, interpret, and narrate the moments in your life that form your own interfaith leadership identity story.

Here are five types of personal experiences that I think are important to reflect upon and narrate to yourself as you consider the identity category “interfaith leader.”

• Moments of inspiration or enrichment from people or ideas of other traditions
• Moments of connection or relationship with people or ideas of other traditions
• Moments of prejudice or conflict regarding people or ideas of other traditions
• Moments of action or cooperation with people or ideas of other traditions
• Moments of recognizing difference with people or ideas of other traditions and feeling admiration or appreciation despite those differences

Earlier in this chapter, in my brief outline of my own path to interfaith leadership, just about all of the elements of this framework are present. There are moments of inspiration
(reading about Dorothy Day), moments of cooperation (volunteering at the Catholic Worker), moments when I recognized the scourge of religious violence (the murder of Yitzhak Rabin), and moments when I connected with someone from another tradition (sympathy with the deep sadness my Jewish friend felt at Rabin’s assassination). Acts of Faith, my first book, is a longer, more developed story of my personal journey to interfaith leadership. As I read that book now, it is clear to me that I was intuitively writing in the narrative structure I outline here, although I did not know it at the time.

Not all interfaith leadership narratives have all the components I articulate later. Nor are the various categories necessarily mutually exclusive. For example, you can have your moment of inspiration with someone from a different religion while you are cooperating with him. Moreover, I don’t think there is a particular order in which these five things have to happen. But I do believe that most interfaith leaders will have a deep sense of when at least some of these moments occurred, and how those experiences shaped their identities as interfaith leaders. In a later chapter, I write about the key skill of using such moments to form a public narrative that can inspire others to begin thinking of themselves as interfaith leaders.

Moments of inspiration or enrichment from people or ideas of other traditions

When Judith Berling first heard about the Daoist fire-walking ceremony, she figured she should go, although her hopes were not especially high. It was 1971 and she was a graduate student in Taiwan studying Chinese religious life and practice. Everything was field work, including, she supposed, something as kitschy as a fire-walking ceremony. She had no idea that the evening would shape her vocation as a scholar of Chinese religions and her faith life as a Christian.
By the time she arrived at the temple, the entire area around the charcoal coals was burning with such intensity that she immediately had to make her way to the opposite side of the courtyard. She was surprised to discover that the participants were not Daoist masters showing off, but young apprentices seeking to pass an early test on their path to the priesthood. She watched them gathered in the corner, barefoot and chanting Daoist scriptures meant to invoke protective spirits. In the center of the room was the fire, a full eighteen inches high. Judith could barely bring herself to watch as each young acolyte, carrying a statue of a deity, circumambulated the flame and then ran over the hot coals three times, chanting mantras throughout.

After the process, each priest-in-training was brought before the Daoist master, who examined their feet and legs for burns. Acolytes who were unscathed had been successful in their invocation of the Daoist gods of protection, passing the test. At least this was what Judith gathered. There was no Daoist host, explainer, or interpreter. Judith had to process the experience on her own.

Witnessing this ritual unmoored Judith, both as a scholar and as a Christian. She did not “believe” in either the Daoist spirits or the idea of fire walking as a valid test for religious leadership. Yet she had seen these young men calmly run through the fire and come out without burns. And even though she had neither rational explanation nor even a relevant frame of reference for what she just witnessed, she recognized that some kind of spiritual elevation had taken place.

When she returned to the United States and attended a Christian church for worship, Judith discovered that the old familiar ritual of hearing scripture read aloud and then coolly interpreted by the pastor was no longer spiritually resonant for her. Her experience of Daoism
had made the dimension of God that is an unknowable mystery paramount in her faith life. But most American Christian churches she knew of sought to explain the divine and, thus, felt too neat and contained.

One day, Judith attended the Great Vigil of Easter at an Episcopal parish. The service relied on dynamic symbols (light and darkness, chanting and music) rather than verbal explanations to dramatize the biblical story. As Judith sat through the epic—from creation to the flood to the birth, death, and resurrection of Christ—it struck a place deep inside her that had been unmoved for a long time. Judith felt herself coming back to Christian worship and the church, grateful to have encountered modes in her home faith that helped her explore the ineffable dimensions of the divine. She writes, “The fire walking opened up for me a new dimension of religious sensibility that has greatly enriched my life both as a scholar and as a person of faith . . . it has also made me more open to many dimensions of my own tradition and even—dare I say—of my relationship to God.”

Moments of connection or relationship with people or ideas of other traditions

Josh Stanton’s choice to become a rabbi came as a result of a connection with someone who was not Jewish.

Josh remembers his student days at Amherst as a constant swirl of classes and extracurricular activities. Most were interesting enough, but none captured his heart or offered him a calling. He felt most alive during Shabbat services on Friday nights. He would arrive early to set up and prepare the dinner, and stay late to help clean up. “On Shabbat, my joy seemed to overflow,” he recalls.
He was not the only one to notice. One Friday night, Paul Sorrentino ambled up to Josh and said, “Have you ever considered becoming a rabbi?”

The question, although simple and obvious enough considering Josh’s weekly leadership at Shabbat, took him by surprise. Students went to Amherst to become bankers and consultants, not rabbis. But over time, through many conversations with Paul, Josh began to discern a call to the rabbinate. He went to a Jewish seminary after he graduated from Amherst and was ordained in the summer of 2013.

What makes this story striking is that Paul Sorrentino is not a professor of Jewish history or even a fellow student who participated in Shabbat services. He was an evangelical pastor—the Reverend Paul Sorrentino—who simply paid attention to the joy and fulfillment Josh exhibited when he came to the Center for Religious Life at Amherst on Friday nights to prepare for Shabbat. In his senior sermon, Josh credits his relationship with this evangelical pastor for mentoring him into his vocation as a rabbi.

Moments of prejudice or conflict with people or ideas of other traditions

Mary Ellen Giess grew up in a Unitarian Universalist family outside Philadelphia and attended the University of North Carolina. When she arrived in Chapel Hill, she was surprised by the outsized role evangelical Christianity played in public life. Preachers holding signs condemning all non-Christians to hell and student groups handing out Bibles were common sights around town. Mary Ellen was put off by these groups, even a little intimidated. Every time she passed someone handing out Bibles or shouting Christian slogans, she felt belittled and judged.

She was happy to come across a small Unitarian group on campus, finding that those students shared her experience of feeling on the margins of campus religious life. The group also
provided an opportunity to express many of her deeply held commitments, including frequent social action projects in the local community. After its weekly worship meeting, the group would often gather on the UNC quad where a Hare Krishna group served a delicious vegetarian supper.

On one of these evenings, as Mary Ellen was hanging out with her Unitarian friends, the conversation shifted to their disagreements with what they considered judgmental religious groups. From there, the talk turned to their distaste for conservative religion more generally and then, somehow, to Mormons in particular. Mary Ellen found herself laughing along as her friends made fun of the conservative sexual mores of Mormons and their “magic underwear.”

Their laughter was interrupted by a young woman who had been sitting nearby and had gotten up to angrily confront Mary Ellen and her friends. She said, “I’ve been listening to you make fun of my religion for the last fifteen minutes, and I just wanted to let you know that I’m a Mormon and I’m proud of it. I’m actually wearing what you derisively call magic underwear. You can think it’s a joke, but I believe it is a connection to holiness.” The young woman walked away, pushing a stroller with her baby inside.

Mary Ellen is a senior member of IFYC’s staff and a close friend of mine. Her eyes well with tears when she recounts this story, both because of the hurt it caused the Mormon woman and because her actions violated the core beliefs of her Unitarian Universalist tradition—justice, equity, and compassion in human relations.

*Moments of action or cooperation with people or ideas of other traditions*

Ibrahim Abdul-Matin decided that he needed to expand his horizons and test his will. As he had never been out of the northeast, he figured a twenty-two-day Outward Bound trip in Joshua Tree National Park would do the trick. After an arduous journey getting to a Wild West desert town
called Twentynine Palms, Ibrahim was excited to meet his fellow travelers. All of them seemed friendly except one, Christian, who immediately informed the group that the end of the world was near and whoever did not accept Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior better get ready to burn in hell. Muslims, he explained, would burn in the hottest part.

Ibrahim is a Muslim. He is also a pretty big guy. So was Christian. As there were no naturally occurring water sources on the trail (the group hiked from water cache to water cache), the two biggest people in the group were automatically tasked to be the water carriers. Ibrahim and Christian were destined to spend a lot of time together.

The first few days were bristly, but slowly the common task of carrying water helped them form a bond. They discovered that it was more pleasant to talk to one another while carrying the large jugs of water than walk in stubborn silence. When Ibrahim woke early to make *fajr* prayer, he was surprised to see Christian already awake, praying. In their conversations, they were struck by the fact that they were both processing the physical experience through their respective religious frameworks. They made clear that they disagreed with the other’s doctrine, but still found ways to support the other’s faith. For example, if one did not wake in time for early morning prayers, the other would nudge him.

For the final leg of an Outward Bound trip, the instructor separates and the group members have to choose two navigators. They chose Christian and Ibrahim, two people who disagreed on doctrine and still managed to build a friendship, support one another’s faith, and could be trusted to lead the group home.

*Moments of recognizing difference with other religious people or ideas, yet feeling admiration*
Walter Kirn found himself disgusted by the anti-Mormon prejudice being aired by much of the mainstream media during Mitt Romney’s presidential run in 2012. He was especially upset by people who fancied themselves educated and progressive. For example, Charles Blow, a columnist for the New York Times, made a derisive reference to the ritual clothing some Mormons wear, calling it “magic underwear.”

Walter responded by writing an essay for the New Republic about his little-known past as a Mormon, his break with the doctrine of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (LDS), and his continued admiration for the community. He begins the essay by recounting difficult stories from his childhood. His father was teetering on the edge of insanity—talking to himself in public, letting his legal business shrivel and die—and Walter’s whole world seemed on the brink of falling apart. On a flight home, in a particularly deep despair, Walter’s father found himself seated next to a Mormon couple “that radiated serenity and calm.” He shared his story with them, and they helped make sure he got where he was going safely. They also got the church involved in his life. Mormons started to show up at the Kirn household, offering friendship and support. Grateful for the stability and community, the Kirns became Mormons.

Walter left the church in his late teens. He had stopped believing in LDS doctrine, no longer felt moved by Mormon rituals and ceremonies, and frequently violated the church’s restrictions on sexuality. When he turned seventeen, he decided not to serve a Mormon mission, as the vast majority of LDS boys do.

Yet he continued to appreciate the Mormon commitment to community. It had served Walter well in his childhood, and it turned out he needed it in adulthood as well. In the article, Walter recalls a time when he felt his own life spiraling downward. He was recently divorced, taking too many meds, and on the brink of financial ruin. He traveled to Los Angeles to pursue a
new relationship and some creative projects, and needed a place to stay. His poor credit score got him bounced from several guesthouses, but one landlord seemed willing to take a chance on him. Turns out, the landlord was Mormon. A number of people in the little housing development were Mormon as well. Not only did they let Walter borrow old sofas and tables for his apartment, they cleaned the furniture first and helped move it inside his apartment.

He hung out with the Mormon crew during their barbecues and ice cream socials. He was invited to attend weddings and to ride along on road trips. Nobody said anything judgmental when it was clear that Walter’s girlfriend was spending the night at his place, and nobody pressured him to attend worship services. He was allowed to be part of the community in the ways that were comfortable for him.

In that space, Walter’s life began to feel full and balanced again. He writes, “I’d forgotten that social life could be so easy. I’d forgotten that things most Americans do alone, ordinary things, like watching television or listening to music or sweeping a floor, could also be done in numbers, pleasantly . . . the direction of the pursuit of happiness was toward the advancement of the common good.”

Walter’s life is an excellent illustration of how you can have both profound disagreements with some dimensions of a religion and still appreciate, even gain from, other parts of it.
