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OPINION

Friday, October 27, 2006

Bridging cultural, geographic gap

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GUEST COLUMNISTS

International conflicts rarely manifested themselves on the Seattle scene. In recent years, unfortunately, this has changed.

In the wake of 9/11, local Sikhs were harassed under the misperception they were Arabs and mosques needed protection against vandalism. Recently, a KIRO radio talk-show host even called for mass killing of Muslims under suspicion. This summer as the Israel-Lebanon war wound down, a Muslim convert to Christianity, suffering from bipolar disorder, attacked the Jewish Federation of Greater Seattle, killing one and wounding five. Separately, a number of synagogues were defaced. Perhaps it is a sign of our increasing internationalization that overseas problems get played out here in such an unwelcome manner.

Both of us are immigrants to America; one a Jew from Canada and the other a Muslim from Pakistan. One is a Zionist, albeit a progressive one, who supports a two-state solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. The other supports a single-state solution with equal rights for all three faith-groups and a balance of powers such that no single faith or people can be overwhelmed.

We disagree on many issues but we listen, we talk and share an outlook of common human values. We agree that the future of our society -- perhaps of humanity -- depends on people desiring to build bridges of communication and understanding across the chasm of fear and ignorance.

Conflicts can polarize ordinarily well-intentioned people and lead them, often unwittingly, to embrace positions they might not otherwise hold. The hardest thing in the midst of conflict is to recognize that "the other" is a person just like you, with many of the same hopes, fears and perhaps the same goals! Learning to truly listen to "the other" without becoming defensive and acquiring the skills to share your concerns without becoming provocative is a real challenge.

Unfortunately, this perspective appears to be out of favor in our country. The media favor confrontation in their reportage. Politicians have retreated into partisanship rather than seeking common ground for the common good.

Nonetheless, if our community is to overcome the legacy of this summer's violence and if our country is to surmount its paralysis at the top, we need to learn how to listen and to talk with an open heart; we need to seek understanding without necessarily requiring agreement.

In the wake of this summer's wars and subsequent tragic hate crime in Seattle, we call on everyone in our community to not just a return to civility but to seek a genuine opening of the heart. Fortunately, such efforts have begun.

Opening of the Heart, a local non-profit organization, is providing community members an opportunity to come together across neighborhood and cultural lines to listen to one another and share personal stories of targeted violence and war experience.

The event -- called "Intentional Communication Story Circle and Workshop: Survivors of Hate Crime and War," will take place from 11 a.m. to 6 p.m. Sunday at the Richard Hugo House in Seattle. It will feature first-hand accounts by Jewish and Arab community members who were visiting Israel or Lebanon during the war.

Rabbi Anson Laytner is executive director of the greater Seattle chapter of the American Jewish Committee. Jeff Siddiqui represents American Muslims of Puget Sound.

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