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### OPINION

# Why a Muslim imam showed up at the Colleyville synagogue to offer spiritual help

My friend Omar Suleiman resisted the habit of fearful thinking engrained in so many of us.





incident." (Brandon Wade / ASSOCIATED PRESS)



By Nancy Kasten

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*This column is part of our ongoing Opinion commentary on faith, called **Living Our Faith**. Find the full series **here**.*

Wendy Wood teaches psychology at the University of Southern California. Her research focuses on habit formation. She has discovered that people who want to start a new habit don't usually succeed when they rely on self-control to achieve that change.

Lasting change is much more likely when a system is set up to make the desired behavior reflexive rather than intentional. In one study she and her colleagues used a computer game to train people to eat carrots in place of M&Ms.

Researchers invited hungry subjects to play a game where they moved a joystick in the direction of carrots when they saw them on a screen. By doing so they won carrots and got to eat them.

After participants were trained to get carrots by moving the joystick toward them, they were given the opportunity choose M&Ms instead. When the screen was set up so the carrots were in the same spot as they were before the M&Ms were added, most continued to choose carrots. But when the screen changed and they had to actually alter the way they moved the joystick in order to choose the carrots, they had to stop to think, and more of them chose M&M's.

Wood's research shows that habits are greatly influenced by systems, both personal and communal. She has shown that New Year's resolutions are frequently abandoned because they feel strange, uncomfortable, or out of place. But behaviors are more



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BY 

When I was young, most people I knew did not wear seat belts. Now I think everyone I know does. The first generation of seat belt wearers had to consciously change their behavior, not just because they wanted to reduce the risk of injury, but because they wanted to avoid getting tickets. Now I dare to say that seatbelt wearing has become reflexive. It takes more thought and feels more uncomfortable to refrain from putting one on than it does to buckle up.

Wood has shown scientifically in the 21st century what the Psalmist observed long ago. Our fullest, healthiest and most satisfying lives as individuals are lived in communities where virtue, righteousness and wisdom are followed, made evident, and embedded.

Our text for today, Psalm 1 reads:

“Happy is the person who did not follow in the counsel of the wicked, and did not stand in the path of sinners, and did not dwell in the camp of fools. Their delight is in God’s Torah — they choose to meditate on God’s teaching day and night. They are like a tree planted on the banks of a river, whose fruit is yielded in season and whose leaves do not wither. Everything they do will succeed.”

What is the difference between a tree planted on the banks of a river compared to one planted inland? It turns out that a stream’s health depends on the trees along its



phosphorus, provide stability to the bank through their root systems so the soil does not erode; provide shade, modify stream temperatures, and reduce pollution, stream velocity, and downstream flooding.

Trees planted on a water bank benefit the water and proximate communities and, in exchange, they thrive. Of course, an isolated tree can't do this alone; there needs to be a critical mass to achieve the desired benefit.

In three short verses, using this apt metaphor, the Psalmist describes the process by which we thrive. It sounds so simple, but it is not so easy. Studying what God intends for us and discerning what God asks of us are not fixed or unchanging. We have to engage in that process all the time, as creation is renewed each day in every moment. It is not always clear which is the counsel of the wicked and which of the virtuous; which the path of the sinner and which of the righteous, which the camp of the fool and which of the wise.

Let me give you an example. Each year Jews observe the Festival of Passover by retelling and reenacting the exodus from Egypt. One of the passages we read comes from the Mishnah, the first commentary on the Torah, dating from around the time of Jesus.

It says, "In every generation a person must see themselves as if they went forth from Egypt."

What does it mean to continue to see ourselves as redeemed slaves? Is it a call for radical empathy toward others who remain oppressed? Or is it a cautionary statement — be vigilant about any sign that your own freedom might be taken away? The extremes of either of these interpretations can lead believers to wickedness, sin and foolishness. Ongoing discernment is required to strike the right balance.

When reports of a terrorist taking hostages at synagogue in Colleyville first began to circulate on Saturday, how many of us asked ourselves, "How can I talk about this situation in a way that does not add to the atmosphere of fear and distrust that already exists in the Jewish community and at large?"



millions of Jews and non-Jews across the globe were holding themselves hostage to a story that largely consisted of speculation and, intentionally or not, a great deal of fear-mongering.

While the world watched repetitive images on network news and social media, Imam Omar Suleiman of the Yaqeen Institute in Irving got in his car and drove to Colleyville to see if he could be of assistance to the negotiators. My husband, Rabbi David Stern, and I spent a long time trying to find a contact in law enforcement on the ground at the synagogue because we were afraid someone might harm the Imam, reflexively and unthinkingly associating him with terrorist inside.

Finally a connection was made, and Imam Suleiman was able to provide the spiritual support, counsel and hope he had gone to offer. He stayed until the hostages were freed, choosing to place his commitment to the safety of the community above all else.

He is a Muslim who embodied the Jewish commandment: Never forget that you were slaves in Egypt. Never forget that when one faith community is attacked, all faith communities are attacked. Never forget that if our neighbor is not safe, neither are we.

In the last book Martin Luther King Jr. wrote before his assassination, “Where do we go from here? Chaos or Community?” King gave his assessment that America needed to be “born again.”

Yesterday, as I worried about my colleague Charlie Cytron-Walker, his wife, Adena, their two daughters, as well as the other hostages and their families, I received countless messages of concern, love and support from friends and colleagues near and far. Jews, Christians and Muslims, people of means and people who struggle to pay for medical care. All colors and all ages, all nationalities.

I experienced a Beloved Community, as King called it, formed by those who choose to be sustained by carrots of love rather than M&Ms of fear. Because the fiber, vitamins and minerals in a carrot calm us while the M&M’s sugar surge makes us feel anxious. Because carrots improve our vision. Because they make us feel full for longer.



Project, asks, “Is this the darkness of the tomb or the darkness of the womb?”

Each of us has the ability to choose community every day and to live that choice out loud. Each of us can play a part in birthing a beloved community, to be a tree planted as part of the riparian forest buffer, protecting our environment and thriving at the same time.

The Psalmist, King and Kaur all invite us to plant ourselves together, that we might thrive for generations to come. Today is a step in that direction, and I thank the Rev. Virzola Law for inviting me to speak and making it possible. God bless you.

*Rabbi Nancy Kasten is chief relationship officer for Faith Commons. This column is a sermon she gave at Northway Christian Church in Dallas on Sunday.*

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Nancy Kasten