

Sharing Sacred Spaces and Radical Hospitality with Vanessa Avery

Intro narrator ([00:01](#)):

Yale Podcast Network. Welcome to the podcast, a Yale Divinity School podcast series focusing on issues related to religion, culture, and politics. In this episode, Emily Judd interviews YDS alumna, Dr. Vanessa Avery. Dr. Avery shares transformative and touching moments from decades of interfaith community building.

Avery ([00:23](#)):

She was crying and she looked at the Muslims in our group and she said, I'm so sorry for having thought this way about you.

Intro narrator ([00:33](#)):

She discusses leading the Sharing Sacred Spaces organization, which uses architecture and dialogue to bring people together.

Avery ([00:40](#)):

Architecture tells stories about people and participants that engage with those stories. They begin to see themselves in one another and become somehow connected to the space.

Intro narrator ([00:52](#)):

And Dr. Avery argues for the importance of radical hospitality.

Avery ([00:56](#)):

Hospitality is the way we turn a prejudice world around one heart at a time.

Judd ([01:04](#)):

Dr. Avery, your work building interfaith relations for over 25 years has brought you to your current position as head of sharing sacred spaces, an organization that uses architecture, education, and dialogue to bring people of different backgrounds together. Can you share a story of success when you are able to bridge gaps or achieve understanding between people of different faiths?

Avery ([01:32](#)):

First, I just want to say it's a pleasure to be here, and thank you for this opening question because it's really what we're all striving for these days. I have had a career that spanned many different methods for creating understanding between people of different religions, but there's something very different in my work in sharing sacred spaces, which intentionally brings people together from different religions to learn about one another. And we use a different method, which is dialogue coupled with spatial experiences, as I call them. So spatial experiences in one another's houses of worship. Our method sharing sacred spaces is intentionally not academic, not intellectual, but we create spaces where we really try to move the heart and share our hearts with each other. So people become very close during these experiences and they share more personally about beliefs and themselves, and they welcome each other into their spiritual homes.

([02:36](#)):

So as an example of generating and understanding across people of different religions, we do a couple of different things. So we still do some exercises. I do a very visual stereotypes exercise with our cohorts,

and it's typically very impactful to see the cultural messages about different religious groups presented really starkly on a screen. So it was toward the end of one of these exercises after a string of negative images from the media of Muslims was shown that a woman in the group just started crying. And I paused the exercise and I asked her to say a few words about why she was crying. And she looked at the Muslims in our group and she said, I'm so sorry for having thought this way about you.

[\(03:36\)](#):

And she apologized for harboring inside herself these violent understandings of what Islam is and who Muslims are. And she said she hadn't even realized it until we were going through the exercise. And the Muslim i mom in our group, just looked back at her and softly said, thank you. So recently we've been doing a lot of work to train people in constructive engagement around the Israeli-Palestinian crisis, guiding people through very different traditional narratives about the history of the conflict. And so many people just say, I hadn't known this. And bringing people into their bodily and mental reactions, helping people understand the multi vocality of the situation. What we do here at Sharing Sacred Spaces is we create sacred spaces between people, so safe spaces, spaces of openness for people to share their views and their stories and their vulnerabilities. And we encourage people to share their struggle to understand. And as we do that, the real bonus, if you will, is finding our common humanity. And that's what makes the real transformation. It's more profound to me than reading a book or doing an intellectual exercise, though those methods are really extremely important too.

Judd [\(05:01\)](#):

Now, I want to pick up on something that you mentioned, the Israeli Palestinian conflict, which definitely has a political dimension. It could also be perceived as having a religious dimension. Have you seen that as an opportunity for interfaith engagement or as a challenge, and has it regressed any of the work that you've done?

Avery [\(05:24\)](#):

No, I'm happy to address that actually. And I think we need to be talking about it. And I think one of the reasons, well, there's so much going on today and it's so complex, but let me just say that most interfaith organizations really never did address this issue. It was like the elephant in the room, and myself included. We do other things that give people skills to address these kinds of issues, but in building relationships, at least in the first year, we didn't want to really delve into these very contentious issues. And I think many interfaith organizations don't have the kind of long-term commitment that we have, and so they really just never do get addressed. It's not the kind of thing you would do at an interfaith event that people come to on a one-off basis and such. So in a way, it's forced people in the inter-religious world at least to talk about it and to figure out how can now, how do we build bridges?

[\(06:38\)](#):

Because things have changed. So I think it's essential. The groups that we have have not been undone by this conflict, thankfully, although I will say individuals each have their own responses, and some of them have become more polarized. They have tried to engage, some of them find it now difficult to engage, and most of them, I would say, are not in our core group. The ones we have going very actively, who are closer at the beginning of the process, have not withdrawn at all. They're in many ways more engaged. So they come to our other programs addressing these issues, and I find that very hopeful.

Judd [\(07:40\)](#):

Speaking of challenges going on around the world, you're a lecturer and interfaith engagement. What do you see as the greatest challenge to interfaith harmony today and how can that challenge be overcome?

Avery ([07:52](#)):

So allow me to say first that I see a lot of great things being done by religions and partnership. We don't hear a lot about these great things in our newsfeeds or on tv, but there are innumerable interfaith service projects, community undertakings, people working together to alleviate suffering, hunger, the unhoused to combat hate work for justice, et cetera. And there are also nonprofits like us and many others that create opportunities for interfaith dialogue and education, of course, and those are happening across the country and around the world, and they're all fundamental to creating a way forward to living together in peace. Nonetheless, we are clearly not in a place of peace, and there are many obstacles. So two very practical obstacles or time and energy. As I work on grassroots efforts, I speak to a very large number of clergy from all different religions every day.

([08:51](#)):

I'm glad to say that many even most have an interest in building interfaith, but they don't all have the bandwidth. And some congregations that we'd love to work with have more pressing issues in their neighborhoods to deal with issues pertaining to survival and safety. Some are dealing with gang violence, major issues of financial insecurity, joblessness, school dropouts, things like that. So interfaith is not a priority for them, and honestly, it probably shouldn't be. We can look at Abraham Maslow's famous hierarchy of needs, for example. Interfaith is not considered at the base, excuse me, of the hierarchy next to survival, housing, food, and safety. So interfaith relations is more at the level of formation and self-actualization. The more work I do in interfaith relations, the more parallels I see to marriage and family, in fact. So taking time to nurture the relationship, and it does take time to look and see what likes you up, what you respect about the other, to encourage safety with one another, love and care and protect one another, build and do what needs to be done to build and maintain trust, right, and have fun together. We need to do things that have fun together too.

Judd ([10:07](#)):

How does sharing sacred spaces use architecture to build bridges among people who are different?

Avery ([10:13](#)):

So our emphasis on architecture is our trademark. So it's natural to ask why focus on a building. I often remark that architecture is a vehicle but not the end goal. And despite this, the building is a critical part of the process of creating bridges and belonging. Architecture always incorporates the context of a building. What is the neighborhood about? What's the history of the neighborhood? It's also about the congregation. What is its founding story? These stories are often ones of immigration displacement, stories of dissent or resistance, stories of growth and expansion. So architecture tells stories about people, and participants then engage with those stories. They begin to see themselves in one another and become somehow connected to the space. Part of our design is to create strong feelings of welcome, and these feelings last longer than any intellectual idea, and it's critical to fueling dignity and feelings of acceptance as well as curiosity.

([11:21](#)):

There's one piece on hospitality I adore, which sums it up for me, and this piece was inspired by St. Benedict, and it goes everyone. Everyone is received as God. The Benedictine heart is to be a place without boundaries, a place where truth of the oneness of all things shatters, all barriers, a point where all the differences of the world meet and melt. But whatever happens to the heart is the beginning of revolution. When I strange people and strange ideas into my heart, I'm beginning to shape a new world. Hospitality is the way we turn a prejudice world around one heart at a time.

Judd ([12:04](#)):

Speaking of hospitality and religious spaces in Connecticut and across America, church closings are becoming increasingly common. Has that impacted your work at all? Do you see these closings as a sign that people are no longer valuing physical sacred spaces?

Avery ([12:25](#)):

This is not something that's impacted my organization's work. Thankfully, the value that sacred spaces give to their neighborhoods is high, and I'd say much higher even than most people are aware of. We'd really be missing something if our sacred spaces were not present, but buildings are expensive to keep up, maintenance staff, programs, everything is expensive. So we do see church closings, and at the same time, I think people really do value their sacred spaces. I think there's a lot that people are trying to do to keep their spaces open. So we see sacred space sharing by different religious groups. A much more recent trend is to create community, not just within the religious tradition itself, but putting, for example, a different kind of gathering space like a playground, a coffee shop, a reading room. There are different things happening like this where current spaces are creating these annexes and these add-ons to bring in more members of the community that perhaps aren't members of that religious institution.

([13:55](#)):

And it helps generate revenue as well, which helps the house of worship. There's a lot going on here to try and keep the spaces going. And so I do believe people need to gather in person. Studies have shown that when you engage in that type of ritual experience and prayer experience together, it increases your executive functioning. So there are real needs for humans to gather together in physical space and not just online. Jonathan Het, you've probably heard of him, I greatly admire him. He is NYU, and he's written extensively on loneliness and isolation right now in humanity, especially the younger generations. And we seem to be always connected, and yet our levels of depression and anxiety are at record highs. So we really, there's something happening that we absolutely need to be in person. So I think regarding the church closings, I think we are entering a new era for gathering religiously, but still physically in space, coupled with obviously hybrid programs. I think that's really interesting and exciting.

Judd ([15:22](#)):

You received your master's degree from Yale Divinity School. How did your time at YDS help you prepare you for the work that you're doing now?

Avery ([15:32](#)):

There are a couple of different ways I'm Jewish, and so I would say, and it's interesting, I had different experiences of my own Jewish identity in every institution that I had been a part of. So they all made different things come to the fore. So when I was at YDS as a student, it was my second master's degree, not at an academic institution, but at a theological institution. So that was different. And I did need to contend with my own experiences and feelings and understandings of what it means to be Jewish in an institution that was theologically not of my tradition. So things like if we began with prayer, it wasn't always inclusive and what was my responsibility in that particular situation. And even now, I think it's always a judgment call as to what is my responsibility? Is it something that I should mention and ask for inclusive prayer?

([17:00](#)):

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So there were things like that that forced me to understand, I guess, my place in an environment that was not necessarily my own and how to respond and how to communicate in a way that asks some questions to help others reflect also, and not necessarily be resistant. You don't want to be resistant, but you can ask questions and create opportunities. I think that was really how YDS prepared me in addition to the incredible faculty and just the incredible education I got there at the ISM in not just religious studies and religion and theology, but literature and art as well.

Judd ([18:00](#)):

Thank you so much, Dr. Avery, for sharing your experiences and your knowledge and your insights. We really appreciate it.

Avery ([18:08](#)):

Thank you so much, Emily. It's been great speaking with you. Thank you.

Intro narrator ([18:13](#)):

Thanks for joining us today. We hope you'll tune in again for the next episode of the YDS Quad Cast.