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In Conversation with Seth Pollack


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IN CONVERSATION WITH SETH POLLACK

Seth Pollack & Marshall J. Welch

In November 2016, EPiCHE Editor Marshall J. Welch sat down with service-learning scholar and practitioner Seth Pollack. They explored how the spiritual and religious dimensions of Seth's life have influenced his personal passions and academic career.

Seth Pollack is Professor of Service Learning, and the founding faculty director of the Service Learning Institute at California State University, Monterey Bay (CSUMB). For the past 17 years, Seth has provided overall leadership for the Service Learning Institute at CSUMB. In 2005, he received the Thomas Ehrlich Faculty Award for Service Learning, recognized as the nation's outstanding faculty in the field of community service and civic engagement. Seth comes to his work in civic engagement after a decade working in grassroots rural development in West Africa, South Asia and Central America. In 2008-09, he served as a Fulbright Scholar in Cape Town, South Africa, where he worked with the University of Cape Town and the University of the Western Cape to strengthen their service-learning and community engagement.

EPiCHE Co-Editor Marshall Welch: Thanks again, Seth, for sharing with us. I want to begin with how would you describe your work and do you see your work a form of vocation, and if so how?

Seth Pollack: I'm director of the Service Learning Institute at Cal State Monterey Bay. I'm also a faculty person. I'm a tenured full professor, which shocks me to say because I never wanted to be in higher education and I never wanted to "profess" anything. I didn't want to be in higher education because of what I experienced from academia when I was working in rural community development. My first career was in international development, initially as a Peace Corps volunteer and then with the American Friends Service Committee, working with grassroots organizations in West Africa. I always felt the oppression of higher education. When "experts" from academia would come through, I felt they talked down to the people. As someone living and working with rural folks, I knew the knowledge and wisdom and brilliance that they possessed, even though most people hadn't been through much schooling. I felt that when higher education experts would come to town, things changed. The local people didn't feel respected, and didn't feel that their ideas mattered. Their expressions shifted and authenticity was gone. It seemed everyone was trying to please the authorities, and it just felt really phony and false. So, academia didn't leave a good taste in my mouth.

So, my role in higher education has come as somewhat of a surprise. And I feel very lucky to be doing this work. I feel like in our work in service learning, as a professor, I can have a foot in both cultures. I have one foot on the campus in academia. And I have one foot deeply in the community. That way, we are able to bring knowledge together and be able to build bridges. When people ask me what I do, I say that I build bridges. I build bridges of understanding across language, across culture, across geography, across class, across identity, across education level, across background. Really, that's deeply what I've felt to be my calling, or vocation—to be a bridge builder.

Another aspect is my role as institution builder, helping to build into the DNA of higher education -- its processes and core values-- new ways of working with communities. The fundamental idea is that we are making it possible for disparate parts of our society to talk to each other, relate to each other, and begin to listen and learn from each other. That's really been my sense of my vocation. I moved from international development work to education because I really felt that "development" (or addressing global inequality) could only happen on a basis of education and understanding. I felt that if I truly wanted to help communities overcome poverty, I could be most effective working to educate, inform, and create a deeper understanding of the problems, and potential that exists. Give voice to the voiceless. That means getting rid of stereotypes and preconceptions, and recognizing the potential that exists in people and communities who have been marginalized and left behind by a variety of social forces, both local and global. All that happens through education. Without that, we continue to make the same mistakes and alienate the people we're trying to embrace. We don't necessarily build bridges. We might build structures that do more impeding than facilitating growth.

EPiCHE: Those structures could even be walls.

Seth: Absolutely.

EPiCHE: It's interesting that you said you didn't go in this work to be a professor, which is really an oral tradition of literally "professing" when a teacher is talking to or "at" students. Instead, your story really reflects what sounds like a vocation. You heard a calling to this but you've flipped it around a little bit – you let your work speak...your work really is doing the professing through actions.

Seth: Yes. My work then becomes storytelling and facilitating learning about this process. I felt in higher education, and in the world of international development, I kept seeing experts coming in and telling people what to do -- Interpreting people's lives and communities and societies and economies in

ways that didn't give people a chance to really have a voice in that interpretation. Building bridges that allow for people to tell their own stories and have those stories be heard and then included in the larger narrative of our societies, or our visions for the future --that's really what I'm about.

EPiCHE: I know your faith and your faith tradition is really important to you. Could you share how your own faith and your tradition informs your work and guides you?

Seth: This is a deep one for me and directly comes out of the time I spent as a Peace Corp volunteer and working for the American Friends Service Committee, the Quaker church's development organization, in Mali, West Africa. Mali is an Islamic country, where 90% of the population is Muslim. I spent five years there when I was in my mid-twenties. They were powerful years for me. As a Jew living in an Islamic society, it was incredibly powerful. When I say that, the first thing people might think of today is, "Oh my gosh, oppression," And "Oh my gosh, you must have had to hide your true faith. How did you survive?" It was absolutely to the contrary. I felt such an embrace, such a brotherhood, such a connection between these Abrahamic traditions. There was such a sense that we were children of Abraham, which was really a blessing. The political climate back then, in the mid-1980s was different than it is today. Perhaps I experienced a little "golden era," where I didn't feel victimized by these larger global political forces, and really was able to learn and share my beliefs with the people I lived and worked with.

In fact, I just saw an article from Radio France Internationale online saying that the village where I lived, Banamba, had just experienced an attack from Ansar al Dine, a radical Islamic revolutionary group in West Africa. A number of people were killed. I can't imagine that happening. I still follow what is happening in Mali, now 30 years later. It shocks me and pains me deeply, because my experience there was one of embrace. I felt so accepted by the people, and had come to really appreciate the beauty of Islam, of living a religious and spiritual life. When I left Mali after five years, my number one goal was to develop my own spiritual self. And that was directly a result of the richness that I had experienced in Islam. I felt like such a spiritual pipsqueak. Having lived in a richly infused religious community, Islamic religious community, I felt its power and beauty; how it added such meaning to every day life. I wanted that for myself, in a more authentic way. I wanted to get more in touch with my own Judaism.

And it wasn't as if I didn't have a good faith background. When my family left New York City for Boulder, Colorado, when I was 11 years old, my father became the lay rabbi of the congregation. There were only 40 Jewish families, and they had just built a temple, but they didn't have a rabbi. So my dad became the leader of the congregation. He did that until he passed away, during my final year of college. He was really the leader of the Boulder Jewish community when I was growing up.

Since there weren't that many Jews in Boulder at the time, there were a lot of misconceptions. People had all kinds of stereotypes and prejudices about Jews. And as a result, my father became very involved in interfaith work, representing the Jewish perspective on a variety of issues. Starting from an early age when we were 12 or 13 years old, as teenagers, my father would take my sister and me to other youth groups -- the Methodists, the Baptists, the Catholics -- and we would talk to our peers about what it was like to be Jewish. We'd do our little dog and pony show about our holidays and rituals, and answer questions like: "No, we don't have horns," and "When we drink the glass of wine on the Sabbath, it's not the blood of Jesus, it's really wine, and what we're celebrating is God's abundance."

So, we had a pretty rich religious training and upbringing. But, here I am in Mali feeling like a spiritual pipsqueak because I felt like I didn't really have a deep grounding in my own Judaism.

So when I left Mali and moved back to New York City, I began my quest to deepen my own spiritual life. I took Jewish adult education courses wherever I could find them, and went to all kinds of different synagogues, as you can only do in New York City. I stumbled onto an amazing place, Congregation B'nai Jeshurun, that really put the values of *Tikkun Olam* --or healing the world--into practice. The Rabbi was Marshall Meyer, who was a student of Abraham Joshua Heschel, one of the leading figures of 20th Century Jewish thought, especially from a social justice perspective. Heschel was very active in the Civil Rights movement, and marched alongside Martin Luther King, Jr. in Selma. Rabbi Meyer, went to Argentina in the 1970s, and became the leading Jewish voice in the "liberation theology" movement in Central and South America. He was very involved in speaking out against the authoritarian regime in Argentina at the time, and supported the "Mothers' of the Disappeared" who would gather weekly in protest.

Rabbi Meyer moved back to New York City in the mid-1980's to revive one of the oldest synagogues in the City. In fact, the Congregation B'nai Jeshurun is known as the oldest conservative congregation in New York. However, it had run into hard times, and was virtually an empty shell. When we arrived in 1988, there were only a couple of dozen people there on a Shabbat service (Friday night service). But Marshall was so committed to making Judaism come alive, not only in a prayer and ritual sense, but also in the social justice sense, that the place started to be transformed. The Congregation became very involved in social justice and inter-faith work, working with African-American churches in Harlem on a variety of issues. I remember Nelson Mandela coming to a Shabbat service, shortly after he was released from jail. It was very powerful to see how an institution could connect faith and social justice work and how hungry people were for that. By the time we left New York in 1993, there were hundreds of people there every Friday night, and thousands on special holy days. The place had been transformed. It had come alive as a home for progressive, engaged, social justice-oriented Jews. It was very powerful for

me to see this happen, to be part of it. I really got a sense of how important an institution can be in creating structures to support people from various kinds of traditions in living out their social justice commitments.

We were very lucky to have had that experience, and were able to bring that with us to California, and then to Monterey where we have lived for the past twenty years. We've been able to help our own small synagogue community bring to life our own prayer tradition, and deepen our social justice commitments. This has been a powerful experience for my whole family.

EPICHE: You mentioned *Tikkun Olam* specifically. That's a powerful tenant from your tradition. Maybe you can explain that a little bit more and how that fits into your work in community engagement, and are there other tenants from the Hebrew tradition as well as other traditions you know about?

Seth: *Olam* means "the world" and *Tikkun* means "healing or repairing." It's putting the world back together. There's a real nice image that was used when I first was introduced to the concept of *Tikkun Olam*. You have to imagine that the entire world is delicately balancing on a tiny fulcrum. And the next act of compassion or healing can tip that fulcrum, and bring about healing for the entire world. It is one way to bring significance to our individual acts, recognizing that they have the potential to transform and heal the world. It's like the domino affect, right? It's more than paying it forward. It's paying it forward knowing that this next act could possibly transform the world, could really bring the healing in the world that is required to end injustice. There is a lot more to it from a mystical perspective. There is a belief that the world was fractured as part of the creation process, and it is up to us to heal it, as partners working with G_D. We need to help the world come back together to its wholeness, realizing that each act could really be the key act.

Another beautiful concept that I love is the biblical phrase, "*Tzedek, tzedek tirdof.*" *Tzedek* means justice. *Tirdof* is the command form of the verb, to pursue, so theor "You must pursue." So the phrase, "*Tzedek, tzedek tirdof,*" means, "justice, justice, you must pursue" (Deuteronomy 16:20). It's the essence of the work that we're doing. We've got to work to end injustice. It is about first acknowledging that there's injustice and then working to heal that injustice.

My father's favorite piece of biblical text was from the prophet Micah, and that has also deeply informed my work. Micah says three things. "Do justice, love mercy and walk humbly with God" (Micah, 6:8). Justice, mercy and humility are at the core. In fact, if you look in the Jewish mystical tradition, the Kabbalah, you see that justice and compassion are counterbalances on the Kabbalistic "Tree of Life." One the one side is the strength of law, *Gevurah* in Hebrew; and that is balanced by loving-kindness, or *Chesed* in Hebrew.

We're always trying to negotiate our way through the application of justice, the application of law in its strictest sense, and a compassionate understanding of an individual and their particular condition or circumstances. The compassion, this mercy, this heart-based understanding might say, "Oh, let's not apply that law so strictly. Let's understand the person's circumstance and have some compassion for them." So, in the Jewish mystical tradition you have these two forces that are juxtaposed – justice and compassion.

Interestingly enough, at the heart of our understanding of service here at CSUMB is the "Service Learning Prism." We developed the *Prism* to help flesh out the various dimensions of the concept of service, and really make that part of our course work in service learning. We identified four core concepts that guide our service learning work, and are at the heart of our "service learning prism." The first two are diversity and social responsibility. The other two are justice and compassion. There's that balance again. Do justly, love mercy and then, gosh, walk humbly. That was maybe the biggest takeaway from my work in rural West Africa -- humility. The realization of, "Oh my gosh, don't preach – you're no expert. What brilliant wisdom is out in the world that I'm lucky enough and blessed enough to become aware of and hopefully connect to and to be informed by?" We have to walk humbly to recognize all the gifts that otherwise we could so easily overlook.

EPICHE: And that scripture you just quoted from the Prophet Micah – to do justice, love mercy, and walk humbly – is yet another aspect of the Hebrew tradition that resonates with Christians doing this work.

Seth: And you know -- I keep a prayer on my desk -- it's really a social action blessing. It's just there and I pick it up every now and again. It's not like I read it every morning before work or anything, but it definitely is there to remind me why I'm doing this work. It is a prayer for social justice work: *Baruch atah Adonai, Eloheinu melech haolam, asher kid'shanu b'mitzvotav, v'tzivanu lirdof tzedek.* We praise you, Eternal God, Sovereign of the universe, who calls us to holiness through doing good deeds, commanding us to pursue justice."

EPICHE: Listening to your lovely story, I'm reminded that there is another Hebrew text – the Shema – that articulates the greatest commandment is to love God with all our heart, mind, and might that is familiar to Christians. It nicely cuts across traditions as symbols to inform this work that we do. It combines the intellectual and academic component – the mind -- with compassionate reflection – the heart -- and through our actions or might. Likewise, the scripture says we are to love our neighbor as our self. That's why I brought up the commonality of these scriptural passages, just to show that there is a bridge between these two traditions. So using the Shema and the Greatest Commandment as an example, what else do or can we, as educators and people who do this work, take to Inform

interfaith efforts in the work that we do? What is our role as educators?

Seth: Here at CSUMB, one of the fundamental bases that guides our service learning work is the importance of knowing one's self. When you do social work in particular, self-knowledge, self-awareness is essential. You've got to know yourself before you try to go help anybody or work with anybody else. That means understanding yourself and your "positionality," or, how your various social and cultural identities situate you in society. Your class, your race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, and religion all affect how you are viewed, and how society treats you. Whether you fit in and are accepted, or whether you are viewed as an outsider, marginalized, and not appreciated.

Faith is an important part of our identities. And I don't think we do enough work around that aspect with our students. I do, in my classes. When we work with our students around issues of privilege and oppression, we try to use our own life experiences as a model, and show what we've learned about our own privileged and marginalized identities. Well, for me, as a white, heterosexual, home-owning, able-bodied, privileged male, there are really no societal barriers to my living out the potential that God gave me. My religion, my Jewish faith tradition, is the one aspect of my life where I have felt marginalization. So that's my angle into compassion, understanding and empathy, around oppression.

It wasn't easy growing up under Christian hegemony. Christian privilege is something that most people don't think about, or even realize that they have. So many aspects of our everyday lives are oriented by the Christian calendar and basic Christian beliefs. Not Judeo-Christian, but Christian. I remember when I was in high school, I was on the basketball team. Our games were played on Friday nights, so I had to negotiate with my dad about playing on the team, because that would mean that I couldn't go to our Friday night worship service. Nobody else on that team had to compromise, or feel a tension between fulfilling their faith tradition and playing a sport. High schools don't play basketball, or football, on Sundays. It's the day of rest. Well not for Jews, or Muslims for that matter. Christians don't have to go out of their way to negotiate with a teacher not to give an exam on the holiest day of the year; because school is not in session on Christmas. Well, as Jews growing up, we had to deal with that every year. And as I learned from my father, it is our responsibility to raise awareness and to educate others. You've got to embrace others and reach out and help them understand who you are and what your traditions and beliefs are all about. As someone says, "you can't hate someone whose story you know!"

You know, there's a saying, "You don't talk about politics and religion with your friends." I think that's wrong. I mean, isn't that based on an assumption that if we talk about these belief systems that we hold really deeply, then we are going to end up in arguments, and ultimately, we'll lose our friendships.

Why is that? Why aren't we encouraged to talk about our deeply held beliefs, and listen to others' beliefs that might be different from our own. Why don't we say, "I want to understand how you feel. What are your deep political and religious convictions? What are your deep faith traditions and what's motivating you? How are you making sense of the world?" Why don't we ask those questions?

EpiCHE: I think one reason is that it goes back to *how* we have those discussions. They have to be respectful and civil. I think that is one of the things within interfaith education that's part of the hidden curriculum, if you will, or the agenda. We as educators have to know how to have these conversations and to teach our students about how to have these conversations about identities in a respectful, healthy way.

Seth: Exactly. And that is very much in line with our approach to social justice and service learning, which is based on giving our students the language and the space to talk about our identities --our racial identities, our ethnic identities, our marginalized identities, our privileged identities—and how those identities inform our lived experiences in the world. We need to talk and listen to each other empathically, so we can have compassion for another person's journey through the world, which might be very different from my own. What might it mean for an undocumented student to come to class the day after the Presidential election, scared about their future and the future of their family? That's a very different feeling from someone who is a citizen and who has grown up in privilege and comes to school after the election feeling like, "Wow, I'm excited about the future. Who knows, maybe good things will happen." We need to be able to talk about how our identities inform how we're feeling, and how we are experiencing the world. Part of what we as educators need to take away about interfaith work is that we need to be able to express our deeply held beliefs, and listen to others' beliefs that might be very different from our own.

EpiCHE: Other than storytelling and having conversations, are there some examples that you can share of some real deep interfaith engagement that you've done at California State University Monterey Bay or that you know of in higher education in general, and what can we learn from those examples?

Seth: I'm going to start with an example from my life that's not in higher education. It's about my daughter. I have two daughters and they both went to Catholic school here in Monterey. It was a great education for them, especially from a faith perspective. In fact, in high school my youngest daughter won the "religion award" one year. I thought that was wonderful. And it really shows you how the school encouraged her participation in the spiritual life of the community, from a Jewish perspective. I love that institution, and really appreciated how they were able to help my daughter feel part of the community, while also encouraging her to be who she was spiritually, as a Jew. Every week she went to mass with the

entire community. But when there were opportunities for her to bring in her insight as a Jew, her experience as a Jew, her holidays, they welcomed it and always invited her contribution.

She graduated last year, and took a gap year in Israel on a Jewish youth leadership program. She was living in the north of Israel with a group of Jewish nineteen year-olds from around the world. During the Christmas season they took a trip to Bethlehem. It was Christmas day, and there was a church that was holding Mass, in Arabic. Maya took all of her group inside, there was about eight of them, and said, "Just follow me, and do what I do." She was able to explain everything that was going on because she knew the Mass from her own experience in Catholic school, even though it was in Arabic!

EPiCHE: That's a great story.

Seth: She not only knew the Mass -- she *appreciated* the mass. She appreciated the beauty of what was happening there on that day for the people she was among, and she was able to translate that for her other. They were South Africans and Brits, Germans, and Australians, all Jewish kids, and none of them had ever had ever experienced a mass before. Then of course, before she left Jerusalem, she was able to go to the Church of the Holy Sepulchre and bless some little olive wood crosses for her teachers back at school and was able to bring them and appreciating what that would mean to them. That's a rich tradition.

In my own life, I've been involved in a Jewish-Muslim, Jewish Arab men's group. We meet monthly and we share our stories and our lives and just try to support each other as Jews and Muslims in the world today.

As a result of that, next Monday I'm doing a session around Islamophobia for our faculty here on campus as part of a Difficult Dialogs teaching series we are doing with faculty this semester. We introduced the concept of Difficult Dialogues in the first session, and shared some tools about how to facilitate discussions around really tough stuff. This is our sixth session. We've addressed other issues such as policing in communities of color, gender oppression, as well as hate speech and free speech. Next week is Islamophobia so my Muslim friend and I have been working on that. I think that's been really nice work and that's how I'm able to bring my interfaith work from the community into this discussion.

There's another organizing project here in town in the Monterey region that's called COPA –Communities Organized for Relational Power in Action. It is an IAF-sponsored project (Industrial Areas Foundation) that is working with churches, mosques and synagogues in our region. They are helping these communities identify issues that they have in common, and then work together to use their power for effective social change. They've been working on health care access and mortgage fraud support and other issues that really affect the lives of our communities. And they approach it all from a social

justice perspective, recognizing that these faith traditions share this fundamental belief in justice.

EPiCHE: I'm thinking back to the lovely story about your daughter and wondering what are some special interfaith opportunities that could happen on a Catholic campus?

Seth: I don't think you on a Catholic campus have to convince anyone that social justice is important. Nor do you have to probably convince people that it should be a part of the curriculum. I think Catholic colleges may be ahead of the game. The opportunity is, then, to now really deepen that – not just do the good old charity work, but to say, "Okay, here's our commitments. What does that really mean? What does *Tzedek, tzedek, tirdof*, "justice, justice, you must pursue" really mean? How do you balance compassion and justice in dealing with homelessness in the street? How do we pass laws that create safety for public health reasons, preventing homeless people from living on the street where there's no toilets and you have public health issues? How do you address that issue, and also show compassion for individuals who have been struggling with drug and alcohol abuse or have some sort of mental disorders or have lost jobs"

EPiCHE: Right, all of that fits nicely into a long tradition of Catholic social thought and so that's not a hard sell. But in terms of interfaith approaches -- what can Catholic campus be doing to build more interfaith conversations and activities?

Seth: Isn't it a matter of not thinking that any of us have the sole answer here? For example, we have a group now working in the Monterey communities, called the Abrahamic Alliance. It's not linked to our campus yet, but it's bringing Christians, Muslims and Jews together around service projects. It's a beginning. And, it would be a great next step to start a campus chapter of that organization.

Connected to that, we bring a little bit of our faith tradition perspective into the work that we do on campus. Unfortunately, it's mostly around doing stuff. We connect around charity efforts. I wish there would be more of a learning piece, an opportunity to then say, "How do we not just work together, but how do we really braid our faith tradition perspectives together so that it's stronger?" So that we're not just pulling the rope of the Catholic tradition, but we've braided into that the Islamic tradition, the Jewish tradition, the Hindu tradition, we've just done more interfaith work.

So...I think if we can be informed by our wisdom and faith traditions and braid them together, you have a much stronger rope, you can do heavier lifting,

And Lord knows, Adonai knows, Allah knows, God knows, that we've got some heavy lifting to do. Our work should be cloistered in one specific community or the property of a specific tradition. It really should build an interfaith community of commitment to justice, which I think we need today. It's

really critical that we dig deep into our faith traditions to do the work that is needed.

Times are hard. My daughter sent a text, the morning after the election. She's a first-year student in university. She went to a world politics class and one of her classmates was in tears. She was an African American Muslim. She was afraid. No one knew what to do or what to talk. I asked, "What did the professor say?"

She said, "Well, it was a teaching assistant and the TA didn't know what to do," So they're just sitting there. That person's reality is our reality. We need to be able to reach out to that person from a tradition that's really an interfaith tradition that's informed by the richness of Islam and the richness of Judaism and the richness of Christianity and other faith traditions, not only to find what's common, but to make our work stronger. We shouldn't allow that person to suffer alone.

EPiCHE: I think sitting in that space and accompanying that student and just sharing that moment is profound. It was intangible, but everyone felt them. Even if you voted and leaned towards the winning side of this election year, you could not help but sense that. Like you said, you're being a part of it and you share that and you encounter that experience. That's a good beginning, I think. Seth, I want to thank you for sharing here. I appreciate and admire how your faith informs this important work.

Seth: Thank you for giving me the opportunity to share.