

Good morning. My name is Alan Bercovitz. My wife, Janine, and I have been members here at St Thomas Aquinas for 10 years. We have three adult children and three grandchildren - as well as a basset hound named Boston. I'd like to thank Jim Trippi for inviting me to speak today, along with Parish Council and Father Varghese; and all of you for being here.

Each of us has a journey - a story - that has brought us together today in this shared space. I have been asked to share mine - specifically my Interfaith Journey, as it has truly transformed me - how I think, how I act, what I do.

Like many of you, I was born into a religious home. Both of my parents were Jewish. My father came from a more conservative Jewish home. Both of his parents, my paternal grandparents, immigrated from Eastern Europe. They settled in West Lafayette and kept a kosher home. My grandfather and his brothers helped establish a temple there - the temple where both my father and me were Bar mitzvahed. My mother came from a more liberal Jewish home. My maternal grandparents both were born in America, as were their parents.

So I was born and raised Jewish - right here in Indianapolis-in fact, not far from here - around 71st and Hoover Road. Besides my four years at IU in Bloomington, I have lived and worked no farther than 6 miles or so from where we all are together right now.

I went through school in the Washington Township Public system, which exposed me to diversity at an early age. Thinking back, my friends growing up were diverse in color, gender, and religion. One of my earliest memories of religion was finding out many of my neighborhood friends were not Jewish. I think I thought they all were. Maybe I thought everyone was. My best friend growing up was not Jewish, and I remember the delight in helping him decorate his family's Christmas tree - oblivious, of course, to its significance. In parallel to public school, I also attended Jewish Sunday school every week, as well as Hebrew school from age 9 through 13.

Thinking back to my pre-college days, I like to think I held inclusive beliefs, but I'm not certain I actually gave much thought to the subject, and I really doubt I had any idea of my white privilege or what unconscious bias meant.

And then I received a gift - I happened to fall in love with someone outside my religion - someone who was Catholic. For those of you who know Janine, you know what a great gift this was- certainly from a lifelong partner standpoint, but now you get to know the rest of the story.

We began dating in March of 1983, when we were both about to graduate from IU. I was one of the first Jewish people that Janine had ever met. Dating was pretty easy. As we became more serious, our conversations became more serious, and I'm very proud that we were courageous and smart enough, even as two youngsters in our early twenties, to have had these conversations, because we knew that before we could commit to each other, there were a lot of questions that needed answering. I should mention that neither one of us felt conversion was an option.

Our parents: Both sides dissuaded us, even though hers like me in mine liked her. We know this came out of love and concern, and looking back, likely some unconscious and perhaps conscious bias. We worked through it.

Children: This was the big one, the one that took the most time, caused us the most angst, could have been the proverbial hill, but once we figured it out, everything else fell into place. Our options were to raise all of our children Jewish, all of them Catholic, some type of mix, or to raise them in no religion at all. Again, even though we were young, we knew that having no religion in our home did not make sense to us as a couple, and mixing religions would likely be more confusing and confounding, so we decided it had to be just one, and we decided that one would be Catholicism.

Wedding: When we were thinking about our wedding, our choices were to get married in a church, a temple, or neither. We could have a rabbi, a priest, both, or neither. Knowing how important a church wedding was to Janine, we decided on that; however, due to push back from my side, we decided to change to neutral grounds. We wanted both a rabbi and a priest. Both wanted assurances that children would be raised in their respective religions. We ended up having a beautifully special wedding in a beautifully decorated Clubhouse - with a Chupah - officiated by Father Clem Davis, then of Saint Monica's Catholic Church, and my Uncle Stan, playing the part of a rabbi.

Place of worship: Our next question was what would our place of worship look like. Knowing we would raise our children Catholic, and knowing we wanted to attend regularly, and that attending both church and temple would be way too much for a family, especially with young children, we decided on attending weekly Catholic Mass as a family.

Holidays: This was the easy one. We have and continue to celebrate all holidays. When our kids were young, this was an especially popular decision at Christmas / Hanukkah time.

School: Again, I went through Washington Township. Janine went through parochial school-from kindergarten through high school. Janine did a lot of research, and what we decided on at the time was where would our children obtain the best education. We ended up choosing parochial school, and we enrolled our oldest child at St Luke's Catholic School in 1994. We were there from 1994 to 2011, and we developed a great relationship with Steve Weber, who was principal that entire time. It was so nice to find Steve again here at St Thomas Aquinas.

I mentioned at the beginning that this journey has been transformational - not only for me, but for Janine, too. For me, going to church weekly was much more difficult than I ever imagined, and raising children in a faith other than Judaism was much easier than I imagined. I think the reason it was easier is that I knew early on, and I saw early on, that what was most important to the two of us was that we were raising nice people, who by virtue of our differences, had an inherent understanding that otherwise, they may not have had. I was very fortunate that I never

felt guilt for not raising them Jewish, nor did I suffer or lament that I was missing out on something, as our lives were full of many blessings.

Immersing myself in weekly Mass and Catholicism proved much more difficult, but it also has been a major part of that gift I mentioned earlier - one that has changed me, shaped me, and revealed to me in ways I do not believe would have occurred otherwise. Explaining this in a coherent way is probably the most difficult part of this discussion, but also the most important. Perhaps it is best if I share what I perceive I have gained, then explain the pathway there.

I have gained understanding, knowledge, insight, and respect. I can recognize and understand unconscious bias, in myself and in others. I have become keenly aware of how words can be hurtful, and I listen more carefully at their meaning. I have walked out of Mass several times because of words spoken (but never here at St Thomas Aquinas). I also recall almost walking out of a Jewish service, staying only at the urging of my friend, my guest, a Catholic, who said "it's okay" when I leaned over to him and said "let's get out of here."

I recall one night when our then grade school daughter came home with a question, saying someone told me today "that your Daddy couldn't go to Heaven." That became our dinner time conversation, but it was a great conversation-a great opportunity- part of this great gift.

You know, as I mentioned, our kids went to St Luke. That's really where our Interfaith work began. Some of you may be wondering how we ended up at one of the most conservative parishes in our area, but looking back, we know there was a reason. Our kindergartener's teacher invited me and Janine in to discuss Hanukkah. Little did we know that for the next 18 years, we would go in not only for Hanukkah, but also for Passover and the High Holidays. When we run into these kids - now in their 30s - they remember the Hebrew prayers they learned years before.

I look back to that pushback we had from my family for a Church wedding with a better understanding, as I, too, felt uncomfortable in Church for many years, but what was the unfamiliar has, over the years, become familiar. In time, as I became more comfortable, I participated more and more - even singing. Sorry to those who sit close by!. In time, I even began going up in the Communion line for a blessing. There was one priest at St Luke who even came up with a special blessing for me.

The closest thing to an aha moment came one Sunday. While kneeling in church, I looked over at a person close to me, his eyes closed in prayer, and I thought to myself that we all pray, and we pray to the same God, and our similarities are much more important than our differences.

So here we are today, Janine and I just shy of 40 Years of marriage, part of this wonderful and welcoming Saint Thomas Aquinas community. We believe in the purpose of this great gift, and that we are better people because of it. We plan to continue to embrace opportunities in our community regarding Interfaith work, sharing our experiences with others. We especially enjoy being part of marriage prep for couples, especially those who may have differences similar to

ours. This path has also led me professionally in ways I could never have imagined. I have been at Ascension St Vincent for almost 40 years. As you know, Ascension is a Catholic based Healthcare system. As a Family Physician, I have taken care of patients for years, and I continue to do so. I have been blessed over the past few years to also be the Physician Liaison for Mission Integration, working closely with chaplaincy and the mission team to integrate Mission into everyday practice. This work has also led me and Janine to work with the Center for Interfaith Cooperation and the Greater Indianapolis Multi-faith Alliance, both advocating for Interfaith work.

So as I conclude, when I look back, I like to think that we have been successful in overcoming our differences and emphasizing our similarities, for if we had done the opposite, we know we would not be where we are today. We have also been successful in raising a family, those kids of ours that I mentioned earlier are now grown adults, and in our eyes, nice people. We are so blessed in many ways, and sharing this great gift with others is certainly one of those ways.

Thank you.