

Karen Telleen-Lawton: The Mosque and Sustainable Sensitivity

It's a truly American value not only to tolerate diversity, but to embrace it

By [Karen Telleen-Lawton](#), [Noozhawk Columnist](#) | Published on 09.06.2010

Sensitivity, political correctness, American values, religious freedom — so many issues wrapped up in one little piece of Manhattan real estate.

Maybe because I've traveled to countries that don't officially welcome the tired and poor "yearning to breathe free," I believe it's a truly American value not only to tolerate diversity but to embrace it and learn. The ideal is to turn enemies into friends, though a worthy outcome may be peaceful coexistence.

[Park 51](#), the community center planned close to ground zero in New York City, is not new to the neighborhood — its Cordoba House parent organization is across the street. The planned multipurpose facility — which will house a gym, an auditorium, a culinary school and restaurant, a library, art studios, child care, prayer/contemplation/worship space, and a memorial for those who lost their lives on [9/11](#) — will be open to the public.

The organizer, [Imam Feisal Abdul Rauf](#), writes in his most recent book that mainstream Islam is pluralistic and peaceful, like America at its best. The center will be a place where ground zero visitors can learn about mainstream Islam.

What if one's only exposure to Christianity were the [Crusades](#) and the

Holocaust?

Among the voices rising against Park 51 is [Rabbi Marvin Hier](#), the director of the [Wiesenthal Center](#) in Los Angeles. He says the site of the 9/11 attack “is a cemetery.” Meanwhile, his group is building a \$100 million “Museum of Tolerance” in Jerusalem by destroying the tombstones in an historic Muslim burial ground with graves dating back to the seventh century. When nascent Israel took over the cemetery in 1948, the [Israeli Ministry of Religious Affairs](#) recognized its significance and vowed, “Israel will always know to protect and respect this site.”

The consequence of remaining ignorant about other cultures is becoming like the extremists we loathe. According to [JStreetPAC](#) about a week ago, a New York cab driver’s throat was slashed in an apparent hate crime. The Muslim driver is recovering. Arsonists struck a construction site for a mosque in Tennessee in late August, and protesters in Temecula object to a mosque being built by neighbors who have been living and worshipping in their community for more than a decade.

You’ve probably heard the famous quote from German theologian and Lutheran pastor [Martin Niemöller](#). I ponder his words when I’m tempted to ignore issues that are uncomfortable: They came first for the communists, and I didn’t speak up because I wasn’t a communist. Then they came for the trade unionists, and I didn’t speak up because I wasn’t a trade unionist. Then they came for the Jews, and I didn’t speak up because I wasn’t a Jew. Then they came for me, and by that time, no one was left to speak up.

“Niemoller was not warning of the Holocaust,” Melvin Bray writes in [Sojourners](#). “He was warning of the willingness of a seemingly rational society to condone the gradual stoking of enmity towards an ethnic or religious group. ... Niemöller was not warning of a holocaust: He was warning of the thousand steps before a holocaust became inevitable.”

When I look to my core Christian and American beliefs, I find myself very conservative of core documents: the [Beatitudes](#), the [Ten Commandments](#), the [U.S. Constitution](#) and the [Bill of Rights](#). These tell me we need to explore ways to make it work, not to find excuses to forbid it.

— *Karen Telleen-Lawton's column is a mélange of observations supporting sustainability. Graze her writing and excerpts from Canyon Voices: The Nature of Rattlesnake Canyon at www.CanyonVoices.com.*