

Dear Fellow Travelers on the Way...

...on friendship walks, during networking conferences,
intercultural workshops or chance meetings.

Greetings. This letter is intended to draw your attention to a special venue and occasion to celebrate this year's World Interfaith Harmony Week with the inclusion of Humanism.

The venue is called **Evera**, a Centre for Renewal since 1996, My name is Henk Bak. (For cv and background of the Walking Meditation project since 2012 see note at the end of this letter.)

The venue, permanently dedicated to interfaith dialogue, consists of about 3 hectares within parkland bordering on the Wombat Forest, Trentham, Victoria. Twelve clusters of native trees and shrubs, most at about 70 meters apart allow, for an approx. one mile meditative walk between them. A farm-shed dedicated to meetings and festivals is equipped for modest catering.

Participants have come from Trentham and the Hepburn Shire, from surrounding towns as well as Bendigo, Ballarat and Melbourne - both individuals and interfaith groups.

The venue is unique in the way most venues are: location, surroundings, internal arrangements and the way the place has been used and developed over time. Fourteen years of personal observance: nearly weekly meditative walks and continuous study, the last nine years together with individuals and groups, has given this place a quality which can be characterized as a 'dialogical space'. The silence, the wind, the bird calls...in the space in and around the sites or shrines one has a sense that a conversation already taking place. A sense of relationships between cultures, philosophies, religions which are waiting to be noticed and honoured...

Those relationships show themselves in layers, the deepest, most primeval, connects the oldest unbroken and the oldest marginalized traditions i.e. Hinduism and the world's Aboriginal cultures, with the evolution of human consciousness, a humanism at the root of all religions and spiritual cultures. The earth, the light, field-and-forest the 'common ground', the basis for all intercultural dialogue.

The relationship between the three Abrahamic religions show themselves as the most articulate. The context widens itself to include e.g. Buddhism which has in recent decades become a teacher of meditation for other religions, and for non-religious individuals and groups, including atheists.

The permanency of the 'lay-out' and the freedom to walk it in different patterns allows for new and unexpected discoveries, which enrich one's appreciation of affinities, openings, resonances before and beyond any conversation. With the added advantage, that the simplicity of the sites serve as reminder, that all spiritual cultures represented has grown from simple beginnings. Under a tree, in an oasis, at the bank of a river and so on. And many of them grafted upon or replacing pre-existing cultural roots: A stillness and simplicity that opens space for renewal and mutual recognition.

None of this is unique in the sense that it cannot re-created elsewhere. I know, because this project has been inspired by an 'Earth Celebration' under the motto: 'Many Rivers – One

Ocean', in Switzerland, 1999, on a large meadow with 8 tents for the world's main religions, a spacious marquee for conference, concert and dance. Each evening during this 10 day conference we would walk from tent to tent, along two half circles with 4 tents to each side, after having gathered in the middle, to speak, to dance, to sing...

It was this experience and pattern together with Thich Nhat Hanh's walking meditations, that I transplanted to Evera where it took on a life and form of its own.

On friendship walks we talk, but don't sing – we walk, but do not dance. Except at the Synagogue, where we were welcomed with music and even invited to dance. Here at Evera I sing at the Hindu and the Judaic site, but it would be great if participants would come with their music and show us their gestures or dances!

It is for this experience, to enrich and be enriched, to instruct and be instructed that you are invited. Venue and project are not suited for large numbers. Hence a rather improvised and low-key sharing of information, little advertising and no promotion. But the project thrives on diversity: 12 sites invite a rich variety of religions and cultures to be present as themselves and as participants in dialogue...

The theme of this year's world-harmony project at **Evera** is a reflection on the realization that violence between religions has escalated in the last ten years and on last year's ambivalent reactions against restrictions...Lowering of self-respect lowers the bar against violent behaviour, towards others but potentially also towards oneself...

Each faith, each language with its own good news, its own way of fostering self-respect in behaving towards others.

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Here at **Evera** participants are invited to bring their own: each to share their own 'good news' and their own 'hallelujah' .

Welcome to the theme. Welcome to the walk.

With best wishes and kind regards,
Henk Bak

PS My involvement with inter-cultural and inter-religious study and activity started at the Catholic University Nijmegen, now Radboud University, in the Netherlands, where I formulated the theme for an interdisciplinary/international conference as **Ecumene of Cultures**. That was in 1964, the year in which I obtained a doctoral degree in history. Intercultural world-history has since then been my study and teaching at secondary and tertiary levels, first in the Netherlands - since 1978 in Australia at what became the Caulfield Campus of Monash University. Before retiring as Senior Lecturer History/ Philosophy of Craft, Design and Art, I convened 'Religious Conversations' 1994-6, at the request of Community Services on Campus.

The Interfaith Meditative Walk project began at **Evera**, Trentham, in 2007 in private and since 2012 public. From 2013 the walks have also become part of World Interfaith Harmony Week.

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