

## SUMMARY

The Faith Club was started when Ranya Idliby, an American Muslim of Palestinian descent, recruited Suzanne Oliver, a Christian, and Priscilla Warner, a Jew, to write a children's book about their three religions. As the women's meetings began, it became clear that they had their own adult struggles with faith and religion, and they needed a safe haven where they could air their concerns, admit their ignorance, and explore their own faiths.

Ranya, Suzanne, and Priscilla began to meet regularly to discuss their religious backgrounds and beliefs and to ask each other tough questions. As the three women met and talked, there were no awkward silences—no stretches of time with nothing for them to say to each other. Honesty was the first rule of the Faith Club, and with that tenet as a foundation, no topic was off limits.

With courage, pain, and sometimes tears, Ranya, Suzanne, and Priscilla found themselves completely transformed by their experience inside the safe cocoon of the Faith Club, and they realized that they had learned things so powerful they wanted to share them with the rest of the world. This is their story.

## GENERAL QUESTIONS

1. How did the book's format (a three-way memoir written in first person) contribute to the overall feel of the book? At what points did the women write different versions of the same event? (One specific example can be found when Ranya confronts Priscilla about the Israel/Palestinian conflict, pages 129–138.) How does each woman's individual prejudices and religion color her interpretations of the discussions?
2. How does each woman's role as a mother influence the direction and tone of the Faith Club? Would the club have been different if it included both mothers and women with no children? How did the children play a role in the challenges to each woman's faith?
3. To which woman did you most relate, and why? Was it the one you expected to when you began the book? If you identified with one of the women because you share her religious beliefs, did you agree with her presentation of your faith? What did you disagree with, and why?
4. Much of the first half of the book deals with Suzanne's and Priscilla's struggles to define anti-Semitism and to confront their prejudices about the other's faith. Did

you feel that Ranya was unfairly relegated to the role of “mediator” (p. 46), or did she welcome it? “For months, I had to bide my time patiently” (p. 126). Why do you think Ranya waited to bring up her own struggles with Suzanne’s and Priscilla’s faiths?

5. On page 106, Ranya says, “The more that science unravels about the wonders of life and the universe, the more I am in awe of it.” Do you think this combination of science and faith is realistic, or must one ultimately take precedence over the other?
6. Suzanne’s first sentence speaks of the “cozy, homogeneous community” at her Episcopal church. What is Priscilla’s “comfort zone”? What is Ranya’s? How does each woman step out of her individual cozy and homogeneous comfort zone, and in what ways does each of them remain there?
7. On page 147, Priscilla wonders if worrying is “a form of gratefulness.” What do you think she means by this? Does Priscilla’s worry ultimately strengthen her faith? How does each woman show gratitude in her life and in her faith?
8. On page 204, Craig Townsend tells Suzanne, “The opposite of faith is not doubt, it’s certainty.” What does he mean by this? Is doubt necessary for true faith?

9. In Chapter 12, “Intimations of Mortality,” the women discuss their differing views about death and the afterlife. Which understanding of death was most comforting to you? Which image of the afterlife was most comforting? Are they from the same religion?
10. When Priscilla confronts Suzanne about her confession that she was uncomfortable being mistaken for a Jew, Ranya says, “She wouldn’t want to be a Muslim either.” Do you agree? Why or why not? Is Suzanne’s discomfort an inevitable result of being a member of the majority, of “not [being] forced to accommodate [herself] to the culture, religion, or even friendship of minorities”?
11. Ranya provides a vivid description of her own method of prayer on page 175: “My prayer is essentially a form of meditation in which I singularly apply my limited human physical capacity to try to connect with that omnipresent universal unknown force: God.” (Suzanne’s description of her prayer is on page 162; Priscilla’s is on page 175.) How is each woman’s method of prayer different? How is it similar? How do Suzanne’s, Ranya’s, and Priscilla’s prayer styles reflect the differences and similarities in their childhoods?

## AUTHOR QUESTIONS

ALL THREE:

1. At the beginning of the process, you are all at very different stages of faith; Ranya, you say on page 93: “It often felt like I had faith but no religion, that Priscilla had religion but no faith, and that Suzanne had both.” Do you all feel that you are coming out of this process with both faith and religion?

**Ranya:** Yes! And that is the most surprising and fulfilling part for me—to have found my religion as an American and as a Muslim. I started off with doubt and insecurity about Islam and ended up a more committed and confident Muslim. In the beginning, my problem with religion was twofold. First, as a concerned mother I was alienated and challenged by the dominant voice of Islam, especially after 9/11, when Islam in America seemed to be more of a burden than a privilege. Through the Faith Club I was able to find within the religion of Islam the traditions that support the foundations of my faith, which has always been built on the idea of an equal-opportunity God—a God that does not discriminate among his worshipers on the basis of favored rituals, or give only members of one religion privileged rights to heaven. My second problem with religion was not specific to Islam. I am still saddened to see how religion in our world is more often than not a divisive force, in which rituals are often used to define communities and relegate to “other” all those on the outside. It is my hope, as it

has been our experience in the Faith Club, that as more people have this dialogue about faith, there will be an increased awareness of how all religions can embrace a universal faith in a universal God.

**Priscilla:** I was always proud to be Jew, but I am even prouder now, after watching Suzanne marvel at the strength it takes to live life without the promise of an afterlife and after reading the Torah, which, as Ranya pointed out to me, was the first holy book for all three religions. I have found my own definition of God, which is the foundation of my faith, along with my acceptance of my humble place in the universe. I have learned that good and evil can coexist. I have accepted the inevitability of my mother's painful deterioration due to Alzheimer's. I pray for patience and compassion as I watch my sister battle several autoimmune diseases. I myself am not afraid to die. And as I experience pain alongside joy, I am grateful for every minute that I'm on this planet.

**Suzanne:** I began and ended my Faith Club experience with "faith," but my understanding of that faith changed dramatically. I discovered its strength as I talked to Ranya and Priscilla about how I found God in the kind actions of humanity. But I also discovered its weaknesses as I endeavored to define the role of Jesus and to accept that there is truth in more than one religion. Those challenges required that I redefine my faith in a way that validated other religions but didn't negate my belief in Jesus and his resurrection. In this process, my faith was tested, and I felt the fear of living without it. Fortunately, the Episcopal

denomination was there to help me along the way. I had been attracted to it because of its liberal attitude toward doctrine, and I found within it one particular priest who helped me define what was elemental in Christianity. This new understanding, which is easily accommodated in the Episcopal faith, enabled me to recognize that there is truth within Judaism and Islam without feeling threatened by that recognition.

2. Talk about the writing process: Did you jointly plan events that you would write about? Did you journal individually and then compare your notes? The linking dialog sections in the book are all verbatim, taken directly from the tapes you made of each session. Were you often surprised by the difference between the recorded conversations and your memories of them?

**Priscilla:** The writing we did was honest, heartfelt, and recorded our feelings and growth in real time. Occasionally we would plan to attend a religious service or lecture together, but the book basically unfolded as our lives unfolded.

I always looked forward to reviewing our taped transcripts. They confirmed my recollection of how fiery and intense our debates were. And when our talks were particularly moving and spiritual, it was thrilling to be able to relive those moments of mutual respect, compassion, and growth all over again. The beauty and universality of the experience was magnified by the existence of the transcripts

**Suzanne:** Our journal writing began with some broad topics that we wrote about individually. What brought us together? What's your religious background? What kind of God do you believe in? We generally shared our writing at the subsequent meeting, and that provided new avenues for discussion and more writing.

Whenever we went anywhere together, we wrote about it. And whenever we experienced conflict, we wrote about it. The transcripts came in especially handy during these times because they enabled me to relive the conversations dispassionately. Freed from the anxiety I may have felt during the conversations, I could hear my Faith Club partners more clearly. And I could sometimes identify the source of my own anxiety. It was like being my own shrink.

**Ranya:** What I still find incredible about the Faith Club was the ease with which our dialogue flowed. The dialogue was addictive, and it became difficult to imagine life without it. There honestly was no shortage of material. Life was our abundant source, overflowing with questions, fears, and aspirations. The taped transcripts were essential to the writing process. They often served as the basis of personal reflections and as inspiration for new journal entries. They were the single most important point of departure and a concrete, tangible record of who we were and who we were becoming. They helped guard and preserve that memory as our ideas developed and became more refined. This was essential for the writing of the book.

3. Your children all play an important role in the development of the Faith Club—and of course, they were the inspiration for its initial meeting! What is the most poignant memory of your children during this process? Do you still plan to collaborate on a children’s book?

**Ranya:** I have many wonderful memories! But if I have to single out one it would have to be when my husband and I were at Leia’s first-grade parent-teacher conference and we were surprised at the work she had produced for a class project. As the only Muslim in her class, she was the one who had challenged me in the first place to embark on this journey—that first holiday season after 9/11—when she asked me whether we celebrated Hanukah or Christmas. A year later, she could still be counted on to challenge my parenting skills. Her teacher had encouraged the students to finish off the phrase “It’s okay to \_\_\_\_\_” and then to draw an accompanying picture. My daughter, who had never complained or said a word to us, drew a picture of herself standing apart from two other girls holding hands. The caption read, “It’s okay to be Muslim. It makes me feel weird when I am the only Muslim and everyone around me is either Christian or Jewish.” The picture is now laminated and prominently displayed on my desk for inspiration (you can see a copy on our website, in our scrapbook.) Thankfully, Leia was soon encouraged to give her own “ten-questions” Muslim presentation, where she challenged stereotypes and affirmed her identity. I will never forget her pride and the light in her eyes as she shared with her peers her own empowered, confident American Muslim voice.

**Priscilla:** I loved talking to my children about Jesus Christ as I drove through the suburbs in my minivan, coming back from the mall. I truly appreciated Jesus and his message, after Suzanne shared things like the Sermon on the Mount and Ranya shared Gandhi's enormous admiration for Jesus. My children will never view Jesus as a stranger, the way I viewed him before I joined the Faith Club. As for the children's book, we are definitely writing one. Ranya introduced the notion to me, four years ago, that we are all Abraham's children. Now that I know that to be true, I want to share with children all over the world the fact that we are all one family.

**Suzanne:** My most poignant moment with my children was a minivan moment, too. We were driving to the Bronx Zoo when a theological argument broke out between my daughter, a believer, and my oldest son, a stubborn atheist. I retold the conversation in the book. Try as she might, my daughter was unable to convince my son that God exists. It makes me sad that Thomas doesn't have the same faith my husband and I do. I don't know why it comes naturally to my other two children but not to him. I think that eventually he will find his own Craig Townsend, the priest who helped me out of my religious confusion. In fact, Craig has offered to sit down with Thomas. If only I could get Thomas to agree to sit down with Craig!

4. All of you live in a relatively urban, religiously diverse environment—Suzanne and Ranya in New York City, Priscilla just outside it. How do you think the urban setting affected your faith club? Does living in a city make it more or less difficult for each of you to practice your own faiths?

**Suzanne:** For me, the fact that I live in New York City added urgency to my desire to understand other faiths. Here I know Jews, Muslims, and Hindus. I drive or walk by a mosque and many temples each day. And, unfortunately, our city was the site of the deadliest of the 9/11 attacks. As a New Yorker, I felt an obligation to understand my neighbors and those who consider us to be their enemy. However, now that our nation is at war, I think people across the whole country feel similarly compelled to learn more about Islam and the Middle East.

I don't think living in an urban environment makes it more or less difficult to practice my faith than it would be elsewhere. What makes it easy is that I am part of a vibrant church community where there is opportunity for meaningful charitable work, spiritual education, and worship every day. Unfortunately, I have time to participate in only a small fraction of it. (Maybe that's because of the complexity of raising my kids in an urban environment!)

**Priscilla:** After 9/11, I was afraid to live in New York, but didn't want to flee the city that I loved. So my passion for New York challenged me to find faith and inner strength. The city, for me, is almost a character in this book. Because of its amazing diversity, I believe New York truly does represent the world, daring me

to be brave and inspiring me to find the beauty in life behind all the pain. It is still an obvious terrorist target, but New York is a city worth the struggle it takes to live here. The vibrancy and diversity of every person and experience in New York is as inspiring as any natural wonder on earth. Life is full of many religious moments, whether I'm staring up at a skyscraper, watching crowds of people streaming past me, looking into the eyes of a stranger on a bus, or noticing the raindrops Ranya pointed out to me as they form their concentric circles in puddles on the street. Although I am enormously inspired by the city I love, I believe that I, along with anyone else, can find religion and faith anywhere, whether on the streets of New York, in a suburban synagogue, or, as I did in the book, in an airplane twenty thousand feet above the earth.

**Ranya:** New York is not just an urban setting. It was of course the city that was terrorized on 9/11 in the name of Islam. The only city my children have ever called home was suddenly in the grip of fear and terror invoked in the name of the very religion they were born into. The burden, the guilt, the anxiety, and the challenge this association involved was very much part of the genesis of the Faith Club. I was spiritually desolate, even desperate, in the aftermath of 9/11, but as a mother, apathy was no longer an option. I do not believe that city life affects the way I practice my faith. I like to believe that faith is something we carry within us that can inspire our daily actions and decisions. To have faith is ultimately to believe in our moral capacity as humans to do the right thing.

5. What is your favorite aspect of your own religion? Of the other two religions?

**Suzanne:** My favorite aspect of Christianity is the resurrection of Jesus. I love its demonstration of God's power over death and its suggestion that an afterlife with God is available to all of us. I like the humility of Muslims before God. Sometimes I want to get too familiar with God, which can be a recipe for disappointment. I think it's important to step back and remember that God is unknowable to us except in glimpses that may be confusing and frightening on their own. In Judaism, I like the fact that the home is the center of much of the prayer and prayer ritual. I think it builds strong faith and strong families, and it supports the idea that we can live our faith everywhere, not just inside a church, temple, or mosque.

**Ranya:** I love the fact that in Islam there are no stringent conversion rituals, nor any confirmation rituals required of Muslims. A Muslim is any person who has declared faith in God and who also recognizes Muhammad as the last of a series of Abrahamic prophets that include Moses and Jesus. A simple utterance of this declaration of faith makes you a Muslim. I also appreciate the absence of a clerical hierarchy (this is especially true for Sunni Muslims) that is supposed to act as an intermediary to God. Many verses in the Quran make it the responsibility of the believer to think, read, and apply his or her intellect to reach the proper moral conclusions. Judaism's American experience is certainly an inspiration that I hope one day Islam may be able to emulate, as it provides

diversity and flexibility of worship for its followers in the New World by embracing multiple traditions: orthodox, conservative, and reform. In Christianity, I admire the higher ideals that Jesus modeled for humanity. I also think there is a joy and a sense of celebration of life that, although some complain may have gone overboard culturally in the festivities of the holiday traditions, I for one, applaud and enjoy.

**Priscilla:** I take enormous pride in the very survival of Judaism, in its sturdiness and endurance, thanks to the strong foundation of the Torah—which, according to our prayer book, is “a tree of life to those who hold fast to it.” I love the running debate Jews are constantly having about their religion and the meaning of life. Debate keeps Judaism alive. And it prepared me for the debates I had in the Faith Club! I love the humility of Islam, the act of submission. When I integrated that humility into my life, it made me appreciate all the tiny, beautiful details of the world. I accepted my humble place on the planet. And, surprisingly, I discovered that acknowledging my humility, in the vastness of the universe, made me feel stronger. As for Christianity, I love Jesus and the message of his teachings. The Sermon on the Mount is one of my favorite things to reread over and over again.

6. At the end of the book, you provide a guide on how people can begin their own faith clubs. What is the single most important piece of advice you can give anyone who wants to start their own club? What kept the three of you coming back, despite conflicts, arguments, and prejudice?

**Priscilla:** Respect one another. If I hadn't felt that Suzanne and Ranya respected me as a human being, I would never have been able to open up to them, learn from them, and display the vulnerability and courage that fueled my spiritual growth. I kept coming back because I kept learning from Ranya and Suzanne about myself, my faith, all religions, and life itself.

**Ranya:** In order to have a truly meaningful faith club experience, you must ask yourself the difficult questions, be honest with yourself, and figure out what keeps you within your own religion. Is it because you feel it is a superior religion? Do you enjoy its cultural traditions? Do you believe that it is the only way one can truly worship God? What are your ideas about God, heaven, and prayer? Keep a journal of your thoughts and establish the trust and sincerity that will allow you to have a dialogue with your faith club partners. Sincerity is very important. From my personal experience, as long as you feel that your partners are sincere, then you should be able to weather any conflict. Trust me, you will soon find yourself addicted to the dialogue and to the higher, spiritual connections and bonds that you will have forged with your faith club partners along the way.

**Suzanne:** Read about the religions of your faith club partners. It will help you understand where they're coming from. Sometimes my outside reading filled in the gaps in my understanding of Judaism and Islam and helped me understand the perspectives of Ranya and Priscilla within their own religions. I kept coming

back to our meetings because I was hooked. I loved what I was learning. I was interested in Ranya and Priscilla. I wanted to understand what made their faith tick, and I wanted to understand my own faith better, too. I may be in the minority on this one, but I think that testing the tenets of one's faith in a challenging and safe environment is an exciting thing to do!

SUZANNE:

1. Suzanne, you are initially presented in the book as the most solid in both your faith and your religion. However, you are also the only member of the group who was practicing a different faith (Episcopal) from the one in which you were raised (Catholicism). How did your conversion influence your experience in the Faith Club? Do you think it made you more open to different viewpoints than you would have been otherwise?

My "conversion" was not a dramatic one. In fact, I am reluctant to call it a conversion. I stayed within the religion of Christianity but switched to a denomination whose liberal theology reflected my own. My departure from the Catholic Church was difficult because it disappointed my parents, but it didn't reflect a change in my personal beliefs.

So how did this denominational change affect my Faith Club experience? It probably made me a little impatient with Ranya's complaints about not having a mosque

in which she felt comfortable. My husband and I tried five different church communities before we found St. James'. I didn't understand why Ranya was not similarly shopping for a mosque. It took a while for me to appreciate how very limited her options were. There simply is not an equivalent of St. James' in Manhattan's Muslim community.

Did my "conversion" make me more open to different viewpoints than I would have been otherwise? I think that by nature I am interested in others' thoughtful views on faith, and that is one of the reasons I felt more comfortable in the Episcopal Church. It doesn't present itself as being the "only one Church of Christ that is fully in possession of the truth of the Gospel" as the Catholic Church states in a Vatican II document. Catholicism considers all faiths, other than the Catholic and Eastern Orthodox Churches, as capable of reflecting a ray of truth, but still deficient in one way or another. It even considers other Christian churches as not "churches in the proper sense". Within the confines of that theology, I don't think I could have been as open to Judaism and Islam as I was in my Faith Club experience. But other Catholics may not have the same problem I did. The Catholic Church does say that salvation is accessible to those who are not members of the "Church," and it encourages interreligious dialogue. There is a bias, however, in that Catholics should enter the conversation cognizant of the equality of the dignity of the individuals taking part, but not the equality of their different beliefs and practices. As a member of the Episcopal Church, I didn't feel any guilt about my growing appreciation for Islam and Judaism as true religions, equally beloved by God.

2. As the discussions deepened, you began to struggle with a fundamental tenet—arguably *the* fundamental tenet—of Christianity: Christ's divinity. Have you

resolved this question for yourself? Is it important to have moments of doubt about your beliefs?

Thanks to the doubt that was the result of my Faith Club discussions, I have come to understand Jesus' divinity in a powerful new way. I see Jesus as the form in which God's will—that we love God and our neighbors—and our human destiny—one of suffering and redemption—is revealed. I recognize that the Gospels don't portray Jesus as interpreting God's law or wishes, but as the manifestation of them. I see Jesus' resurrection as distinguishing him from the prophets and supporting the idea that he is one with God.

When the phrase "Son of God" began to make me uncomfortable in my Faith Club experience, I replaced it with the phrase "of the same essence." I am comfortable with that phraseology. In fact, I recently read that the prayers in the Latin Catholic mass used the phrase "con-substantiated with God" when describing Jesus. This means "united in one common substance, nature, or essence." For me it is a more mature definition than the colloquial phrase "Son of God."

I think it is natural to have periods of doubt in one's faith. The surprise for me was that I came out the other end with a more defined faith than I had before. I am no longer frightened so much by the specter of doubt. I see that, as I struggle with my faith, my faith can become stronger. And in those periods of doubt, I am always comforted by Rev. Craig Townsend's advice to me, "The opposite of faith is not doubt. It's certainty."

RANYA:

1. Ranya, your upbringing in Dubai and McLean was interwoven with some Christian traditions, but because of your grandparents' and father's experience in Palestine, it was politically antagonistic to Judaism. How did these early influences affect your interactions with Suzanne and Priscilla?

I certainly grew up more familiar with Christian traditions, however, my family's dispossession from Palestine never translated into a sweeping prejudice against Judaism or Jews. This may be because my father, like many Palestinians, always pointed out that our conflict was political and not religious or personal. So at our first Faith Club meeting, when Priscilla and Suzanne walked through the door, they did so on an equal footing. After all, I had reached out to them after 9/11 out of the despair and alienation I was feeling as an American Muslim. In my mind, it was Islam that for many was the "condemned" religion in America, and I was desperate to defend and reconnect it to the Judeo-Christian tradition. As time passed, however, their respective Christian and Jewish perspectives did ultimately set us up for different types of conflicts and disagreements. Before my dialogue with Priscilla, every time I got into a religious or a political conversation with Jewish friends, I automatically knew when to stop or to hold back in order to

safeguard the friendship. The big difference with Priscilla is that in the cocoon of the Faith Club, and with our declared mission and objectives, we risked all, and we pushed the envelope to its breaking point. The result was liberating. When Priscilla's Jewish friends expressed disbelief at the truth of my family's painful dispossession, she did not withhold her doubt. When I finally challenged her to reexamine Zionism from a Palestinian perspective and recognize the suffering and victimization of Palestinian Muslims and Christians under a Jewish military occupation, it was not without tears that we were able to cross that bridge. The most gratifying conclusion for that discourse was when Priscilla and I attended Yom Kippur services at her temple. We knew without exchanging a word that we stood shoulder to shoulder and listened united in heart and mind to the prayers of atonement and peace. As for Suzanne, our conflict was not so political, but rather based on what I have in the past felt was a certain Christian prejudice that is quick to condemn Islam and its prophet as a regressive, violent religion spread through the sword. Many Christians can view Christianity with the most liberal of lenses and view Islam only with the most literal of lenses.

2. On page 198 you say that Suzanne's faith "gave [her] a confidence in [her] religion that I did not have yet. I still felt insecure about Islam as a religion and insecure about my daughter's Muslim identity." Why do you feel this insecurity about Islam? Has the Faith Club helped solidify your confidence in your identity as a Muslim woman?

If it were not for the insecurity I felt about Islam, I do not know that I would have reached out to Suzanne and Priscilla in the first place. I have probably always felt that insecurity because I belong to a generation that came of age when the loudest and most recognizable Muslim voice is literal, angry, or Wahabist (a reactionary brand of Islam that has striven to “purify” Islam by returning to the beliefs and practices of the first three decades of Muslim rulers). The reasons for the success and predominance of this movement within Islam have been studied by many. The most persuasive arguments attribute this influence to the power that comes with the petro-dollars that fund and support it. Another persuasive argument has to do with the condition of the Muslim state, its political institutions, and its mosques. Religion can only be as enlightened as the hand it finds itself in. The truth is that, historically, Islam has always had a rich history of diversity. For those who are doubtful, I have even found Quranic verses that support the idea that diversity in religion and worship is by God’s intended design. The Faith Club has definitely solidified my confidence and identity as a Muslim woman. If ever I felt vulnerable to those who cast doubt on my credentials as a Muslim for one reason or another, I am now completely immune. As Imam Feisal explained to me, in Islam there is no temporal justice. This means that in matters of faith only God can be the judge. Most important, I do not feel that I am a lone voice in the wilderness. I feel that I belong to a vibrant, nascent American Muslim community that shares my ideals and aspirations. I am full of hope and optimism about the potential of Islam in America. I, like many others,

dream of a day when our children can truly speak of the Great American Judeo-Christian-Muslim tradition.

PRISCILLA:

1. Priscilla, at the beginning of the book you say you weren't "sure whether [you] believed that God really existed." Your journey to faith, then, is arguably the longest. How did your uncertainty contribute to your experience as a member of the Faith Club? Do you think it was harder or easier for you to challenge yourself and your beliefs as a result of your doubt?

I think it was easy for me to open up to Suzanne and Ranya soon after I met them, to examine and question my beliefs, because I had no other choice. I was desperate to do so. I was in emotional pain and in the midst of a spiritual crisis. September 11<sup>th</sup> had turned everyone's world upside down, and my world had been shaky to begin with, because of my history of panic attacks. My usual ways of coping seemed silly and ineffective. I was praying, but I had no idea why. And once I admitted that to Suzanne and Ranya, I felt liberated. I had nothing to lose. I was open to the theories and ideas they offered to me about faith and religious convictions. I could find out what worked for me and what didn't. I started out lost, so I was desperate to find myself on every level, at every meeting. I wanted to change the way I looked at the world, and in that way, my doubt and uncertainty fueled my spiritual growth.

2. On page 25 you say that you “wanted [your] learning experience to be a private, personal one.” Yet as the Faith Club evolved, you became quite vocal in your defense of Ranya’s political views, despite their unpopularity with many of your friends. How did your understanding of the “learning experience” change? Do you think that taking a public stand is necessary for the full development of one’s faith?

My relationship with Ranya and Suzanne, odd as it may sound, is still private and personal to me, despite the fact that we wrote a book about it, because I carry what I learned deep in my heart. Every time I took a step toward understanding my faith, they were there to support me, challenge me, and illuminate things for me. Their faith rubbed off on me. I am a changed person for knowing them. I began to experience things differently. When I heard people talking about “Muslims” or “Palestinians,” to me they were talking about Ranya, and I needed to speak out on her behalf, in her honor. Although I began to speak publicly, it came from a very private place. When I hear cruel, insensitive, or ignorant comments about Islam or Palestinians, those comments are not simply abstract concepts or political rhetoric. They are direct attacks on the beliefs and heritage of my dear friend, who has become like family to me. And when I speak out, I am trying to do justice to Ranya’s humanity, her strong moral conscience and courage.

I don't feel that all people need to be public about their beliefs. I admire those who worship quietly and privately, as well as those who feel their personal faith requires them to take a moral stand on public issues. However, I do think it's crucial to be respectful of other people's beliefs at all times.

## ACTIVITIES

1. Before the meeting, visit the authors' website, [www.thefaithclub.com](http://www.thefaithclub.com), to explore viewpoints about your own and others' faiths. Use the Faith Club Guide in the back of the book to suggest journaling topics; have each member select a topic and bring in questions and reflections to share with the group.
2. During the meeting, serve some of the food that Priscilla, Ranya, and Suzanne served at many of their Faith Club meetings. For example, you could serve hot chocolate and jasmine tea to your guests. And don't forget Priscilla's favorite—a variety of chocolate bars for a special treat!
3. An important aspect of the authors' Faith Club is their visits to each other's places of worship. Schedule a weekend visit to your local mosque, synagogue, and church. If you can, set up a discussion with the imam, rabbi, or priest.