

Nurturing Inter-Spiritual Hearts and Interfaith Minds

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Not very long ago most of us lived in self-sustaining local villages, grew our own food, and relied primarily on people within our local area. Few traveled very far from where we were born. Each of us had our own set of religious, cultural, and familial beliefs and knew very little about other ways of life. As long as the environment was stable, we found ways to make sense of our short lives within the context of these relatively closed belief systems. This “sense-making” often came through religious expression; in ritual, practice, and dogma. It was not unusual for people with different religions and different interpretations of the human condition to use those worldviews as a reason to mistrust or battle each other.

Today, we are regularly exposed to a panoply of competing ideas, beliefs, and practices. We no longer live in a time where one fixed perspective provides a foundation flexible enough to make sense of the rapidly changing and highly interdependent world. New, more variegated and integrated forms of religious and cultural expression, both within the existing tra-

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Reflective Practice: Formation and Supervision in Ministry

ditions and beyond them, are emerging as a result of these new life conditions. In response to this diverse context, we need ministers with an interfaith perspective who have a deeply integrated sense of the fundamental “Oneness of human experience” and are informed by the great religious traditions as seen in the light of contemporary knowledge.

FORMING NEW LEADERS FOR A NEW CONTEXT

The great spiritual teachings that emerged around the world over the course of human history, without the benefit or challenges of modern communication, have all discerned a basic oneness at the heart of existence and a fundamental interconnectedness that subtly weaves together our separate identities into a common fabric. That experience of oneness and interconnectedness that the saints and sages of all traditions experienced as a lived reality is a necessary corrective to the tribalism and ethnocentrism that has been common in human history. While the great spiritual traditions all include a universal understanding, leaders in each tradition frequently interpreted their perspective as the “one right way.” This single-minded belief often convinced religious leaders they had the right and the obligation to bring those outside the fold to their truth.

In a world as diverse and interdependent as ours, it is necessary for each spiritual community, with its own unique interpretation of human experience, to understand the unique value of other traditions and to deepen their own faith life as a result. No single perspective can provide the ultimate basis for a vibrant, meaningful, and sustainable life on our increasingly small planet. Traditional approaches to interfaith dialogue promote respect and contribute to understanding among the various religious traditions, but more is called for today.

In our work at One Spirit Learning Alliance and One Spirit Interfaith Seminary in New York City, we bring together a variety of approaches that can best nurture the emergence of our students’ deepest nature, which relies on that experience of Oneness. People who no longer feel at home in a singular tradition or who find they feel at home in different ways in different traditions, need new religious expressions that better serve our multi-ethnic world. These new patterns include fundamental premises and practices that support a more integral spiritual identity and communities that nurture those in the midst of forging this new identity. Formation programs for inter-

faith ministers should be aimed less at educating leaders in a particular theology and more at forging hearts and minds with a deep religion. Ministers with this capacity can provide skillful service to others, even in times of stress, from a place of equanimity and love.

In this essay, “deep religion” is understood as an “inner membrane” that filters our perceptions, interprets our experience, and provides input to our actions. It has room for multiple perspectives and an ability to consider the long-term implications of any action. Religious leaders who embody such deep religion, regardless of their tradition, can take the perspective of the other and have a capacity for genuine presence, even in trying times. By “genuine presence” we mean the capacity to take in the immediate experience with open heartedness, compassion, and curiosity. This quality of genuine presence is not reactive and is comfortable with the paradoxes of contemporary life.

As people shift to a more inclusive identity, they begin to express their leadership and ministry from a place of embodied presence that incorporates and deepens the skills they already have. The developmental unfolding of an identity that manifests embodied presence is different for each individual. There are, however, some common themes:

- Our thinking becomes more transparent to the reality that the entire creation springs from a single source
- We begin to realize that our welfare is intimately connected to the welfare of the entire global community, not just the welfare of our family and friends
- This more inclusive perspective becomes very real for us as our higher thinking center emerges and as we move from logical analytical thinking to vision-logic, or said differently, as we develop a more complex set of cognitive capacities
- Over time, as our higher heart center develops, our emotional awareness expands and our capacity to remain centered and present under stress grows.

Religious leaders who have the depth and skill to inspire others to create a world of understanding and respect must be grounded in an experience of oneness and a sense of interconnectedness and be able to act from a place of embodied presence. This endeavor requires both the formation of formal interfaith clergy and the development of leaders who embody the “priesthood of the laity” in all walks of life. This orientation has been called integral or trans-traditional. Brother Wayne Teasdale called it an inter-spir-

itual perspective for an inter-spiritual age.¹ This essay explores some of the processes that support the formation of the heart, mind, and character necessary for an interfaith minister to be a conduit for skillful service in an increasingly diverse community. These reflections are based on programs developed at the One Spirit Learning Alliance and One Spirit Interfaith Seminary in New York City.

EXPANDING OUR PERSPECTIVES ACROSS MULTIPLE INTELLIGENCES

Bringing this quality of embodied presence into one's character is the foundation for the formation in interfaith ministers and spiritual leaders in our increasingly fast paced, interconnected, and diverse world. As our students come to know themselves and each other in a genuine and heartfelt way, their differences become less significant and each person recognizes that the bond that unites them is far more powerful than anything that keeps them apart. When this development of the self occurs in a healthy way, we do not lose our unique personal qualities, gifts, and challenges or our capacity to function effectively in the world. Instead, we experience ourselves and the world as one. Because we are acutely aware of an interconnectedness that extends beyond the boundaries of the self, we become more expansive and experience a greater sense of equanimity in all aspects of life.

Such integral development, that allows our entire character to express our "true nature" as embodied presence, requires a clear sense of purpose and a sustained focus of attention. As our perspective expands from ego-centric (it is all about me) to ethno-centric (it is all about my group) to world-centric (it is about all of us), we experience our boundaries expanding. As we live into this ideal that some have called the Christ Consciousness, we are increasingly able to embody universal love and our circle of concern grows to include the whole world. We can also imagine our boundaries dissolving as we become empty of any sense of a separate self and embrace the entire cosmos as ourselves. Whether we conceptualize this experience with a western (universal love) or eastern (emptiness) orientation, the perspective of "us versus them" thins to the point where "I" and "you" become "One."

This evolution of character is not a simple linear process. It emerges over time and may include two steps forward and one step back. When we encounter unsettling situations or certain people, our sense of centered purpose may dissolve, and we may forget what we know about the interconnectedness

of life. When that occurs, it is probable that our Emotional Intelligence is still caught in a reactivity that throws us off course when the outside world comes at us in unexpected ways. We are unable to translate our clear thinking and deep feeling into effective action. Our Conative Intelligence (the capacity for skillful action) remains less developed, and we cannot translate our mental perspective or emotional experience into skillful service. With practice and attention, however, our character becomes less fragmented and these (and other) intelligences become more integrated as they weave together to form a common tapestry.

This process of integration unfolds in stages and is simultaneously a psychological process and a spiritual unfolding. It is a psychological process because it looks deeply at those impulsive energies, emotional soft spots and recurring stories that attach us to a limited sense of who we are. At the same time, it is a spiritual unfolding because it supports our opening to higher energies, more authentic feelings, and a luminous clarity of thought. As that luminosity fills our vision, it draws us inward to a deeper wisdom and forward to a sense of self no longer bound by fear. As this experience unfolds, it compels us to express our love in skillful service to the world. Only through an integral process (psychological and spiritual across multiple intelligences) that develops our inner capacities of mind, heart, and spirit can we embody the genuine presence that is essential for the effective practice of interfaith ministry and spiritual leadership².

PRINCIPLES OF INTERFAITH FORMATION

Our approach to formation depends on creating a worldly monastery that holds our students in an experience of community that is simultaneously safe enough to ask difficult questions without judgment and challenging enough to encourage students to reach beyond their limits. All of our programs address the inner life of the individual (the “I” space), the shared life of relationships or community (the “We” space), and the structured experience of organizational life (the “It” space). Each program seeks to embody certain core principles, including:

- An inter-spiritual perspective honestly exploring the spiritual treasures and institutional shortcomings of the world’s great religious traditions
- A basis in experience and understanding rather than history or belief

- An integral approach weaving together the ancient traditions with contemporary knowledge in psychology, science, and cultural studies
- A healthy integration of body, heart, mind, and spirit,
- The use of everyday experience to move closer to what is true
- A developmental view presenting human evolution as a multi-step process that unfolds to an inner rhythm in each person's soul.

The aim of these core principles is to invite students into a transformative fire that can burn away the obscurations to their deeper nature. This begins to happen when they move outward from their own spiritual history to study and experience a variety of less familiar teachings in a direct and personal way. In the course of moving outward to study and experience the diversity of spiritual wisdom, students also move inward to strengthen their psychological foundation, deepen their spiritual life, and develop their mind, heart, and will.

As this transformative process unfolds, they experience relationships with their peers that are free of shame, open to curiosity, and provide an opportunity let go of automatic patterns, old stories, and emotional reactions that tie them to the past. Within the contemplative evolutionary field that is created in the program, a safe and open space emerges that includes both the interior life of the individual and the collective life of the community. The following characteristics emerge within and between students and faculty who participate in this experience:

- Seeing life as the ultimate spiritual practice
- Using our relationships as an opportunity to polish each other (rather than irritate each other)
- Viewing every perception as a perspective that is an out-picturing of our inner world
- Working with our shadow to free us from the stories that bind us to the past and the fantasies that draw us to the future
- Learning to be centered in the present moment
- Coming to terms with our religious history
- Experiencing various spiritual practices from the great traditions to open our hearts, minds, and bodies to the Divine Presence
- Incorporating a regular set of practices into our daily life
- Studying the esoteric and exoteric teachings of the great traditions

- Understanding how contemporary knowledge brings a new perspective to the ancient teachings
- Exploring contemporary spiritual teachings and related areas of knowledge
- Developing the desire for lifelong study and ongoing practice
- Engaging in service to the larger community
- Dedicating ourselves to an intentional life and creating personally meaningful vows to embody that aspiration.

These characteristics manifest in unique ways in each of our programs. Given the increasing number of individuals in our society who are no longer rooted in a single tradition, many of the people our graduates serve require a perspective that both includes and transcends elements of any particular tradition. This is why developing the capacity for embodied presence is an important aspect of our training. The inner exploration in our programs is aimed at deepening the student's spiritual life. Simultaneously, the outer journey builds the skills and capacities necessary to serve others effectively. This dual focus of attention is apart of all of our offerings.

The first year of the two-year professional training in interfaith ministry includes study of the world's great religious traditions as well as contemporary spiritual expressions and relevant psychological principles. These studies become the foundation for serving a diverse spiritual audience that increasingly transcends traditional boundaries. At the same time, a variety of practices aim to develop the students' inner life and to support their capacity to embody the Divine Presence. Students explore their relationship to the western spiritual tradition and to their own religious background in order to come to terms with any unfinished business in their spiritual or religious history.

In addition to traditional academic work, students are invited to enter the experience of various religious traditions as fully as possible. Each month students are asked to choose a spiritual leader and to explore how that person can serve as a source of inspiration for the student. They are expected to participate in ritual expression as well as daily spiritual practice based in the tradition they are studying. During class, students are exposed to guest lectures from long-term spiritual practitioners and leaders of each tradition. Students share their experiences in a variety of settings, take part in each others' journey, and learn to listen to themselves and to each other in new ways.

The focus of the second year is on the journey from birth to death and the capacity to offer skillful service to a diverse population. During their

second year students investigate the stages of life. At each stage of life's journey the challenges and opportunities presented by the relevant transition are explored. In order to develop the capacity for embodied presence interpersonally, students deepen their ability to listen to each other without judgment. They learn to gently ask open-ended questions with a receptive heart. All of this is held in the context of an approach to inter-spiritual counseling that provides support and guidance to others without necessarily using any particular language to bring God, Source, or True Nature into the room. At the same time, students learn the basic approaches and language that springs from various traditions so they can speak that language when it would be appropriate. Prayer, meditation, and the power of silence are explored through the great traditions as well as contemporary spiritual and psychological understandings.

TRANSFORMING AWARENESS

In many of the great traditions we are told to "be here now" or to live in the present moment. This teaching points out that we can only experience our deeper nature when we let go of the chains that tie us to a conditioned notion of our self and that obscure the experience of our deeper nature. Only then can we relate to others in a truly authentic way that serves us both. This transformation is simple but quite difficult, as witnessed by the relatively small number of us who wake up to our true nature in a sustainable way or who can bring that awareness into our collective lives.

Opening up the capacity for such transforming awareness happens more easily in an environment that supports both personal work on our interior life (work in the *I* space) and conscious work on our experience of relationship (work in the *We* space). Given that the stories and feelings we carry around about who we are were primarily formed in our early relationships, it makes sense that the proper relational context can support the process of re-imagining our sense of self. As individuals move through the formation process, they feel greater interconnectedness with their fellow students and with the larger environment. They begin to live more fully in an experience of oneness. For most students, the memory of this experience lingers and becomes a source of inspiration to continue the deep personal study and relational work they have taken on in the program.

The opening of inter-spiritual hearts and the development of interfaith minds is a central aspect of preparing individuals personally and professionally for the work of interfaith ministry. It is our expectation that every student who completes an interfaith formation program should have made considerable personal spiritual progress, have a better understanding of their own psychology, have a clear understanding of the great spiritual traditions as seen in the light of contemporary knowledge, and have developed an ability to continue learning from every experience they encounter. People who have completed an interfaith formation program should have a clearer sense of purpose and a deeper understanding of their relationship to the Divine Presence in their lives. They will see God in a different light than when they began. Whether they remain rooted in a single tradition—be it the Christianity or Judaism of their birth or the Buddhism or Yoga they came to later in life—or whether they have created a personal spirituality grounded in two or more sources of wisdom, the aim of our program is that every student develops a more nuanced view of life, a more inclusive view of God, and a greater capacity for skillful service.

NOTES

1. Wayne Teasdale, *The Mystic Heart: Discovering a Universal Spirituality in the World's Religions* (Novato, Calif.: New World Library, 2001). cf. Wayne Teasdale, *A Monk in the World: Cultivating A Spiritual Life* (Novato, Calif.: New World Library, 2002).

2. Various researchers have documented different aspects of the process of integrating these intelligences. The following books and perspectives have influenced the development of our particular perspective: James W. Fowler, *Stages of Faith: The Psychology of Human Development* (New York: Harper Collins, 1981); Robert Kegan, *In Over Our Heads: The Mental Demands of Modern Life* (Boston, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1998). cf. Robert Kegan, *The Evolving Self: Problem and Process in Human Development* (Boston, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1982); F. Clark Power, Ann Higgins, and Lawrence Kohlberg, *Laurence Kohlberg's Approach to Moral Education* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991); Carol Gilligan, *In A Different Voice* (Boston, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1993); Jane Loevenger, *Ego Development* (San Francisco, Calif.: Jossey-Bass, 1976); Don Edward Beck and Christopher C. Cowen, *Spiral Dynamics: Mastering Values, Leadership, and Change* (Malden, Mass.: Blackwell Publishing, 1996); Ken Wilber, *Integral Spirituality: A Startling New Role for Religion in the Modern and Postmodern World* (Boston, Mass.: Integral Books, 2007). cf. Ken Wilber, *Integral Psychology: Consciousness, Spirit, Psychology, Therapy* (Boston, Mass.: Shambhala, 2000); Ken Wilber, *A Theory of Everything* (Boston, Mass.: Shambhala, 2001). Ken Wilber, *A Brief History of Everything* (New York: Random House, 2001).