

*At a time when ideological divisions ravage the human community, it is good to remember that we are endowed with exactly what we need to find our way home to each other and mend the torn fabric of belonging.*

### ***The Sap is Rising***

Springtime in the Sangre de Cristo Mountains where I live is really still winter. Drifts of snow pack the shadows of the northern slopes, and the high desert landscape feels barren. The equinox is coming, but the apricot trees will not bud for another month and even then the daffodils will push their way through a latticework of ice. Yet even as the juniper and piñon trees hide their rising sap, our multicultural community is celebrating the rebirth of the world in a vast array of ceremony and ritual.

The Native people of the Pueblos along the Rio Grande River valley are absorbed in private preparations closed to the public. Hispanic Catholic congregations, led by the *Hermanos Penitentes* (formerly a secret society) engage in elaborate reenactments of the Passion of Christ, walking for miles in procession with statues of *Jesucristo* and his mother María, chanting medieval Spanish hymns till tears stream down their faces. Our small Jewish community gathers at collective Seder tables to commemorate the Exodus and affirm the essential message of Passover: “No one is free until we are all free.” Anglo newcomers throw birthday parties at the local Hindu Temple for Lord Hanuman, embodiment of service and devotion, and kneel in the Zendo to pour cups of sweet tea on a statue of the baby Buddha in gratitude for his coming to earth to free all beings from sorrow.

I grew up in a climate of religious diversity and spiritual intensity. In our counter-cultural world almost everyone I knew was on some kind of spiritual path, even my secular humanist parents. Although my family shied away from institutionalized religion, they embraced the freeform magic that crackled in the air all around us during those experimental years of the early 1970s. My father studied numerology and read the cards, first holding the seeker’s hands in his while he “tuned” before spreading out the deck to see what message the Universe had for them. My mother forged her own theology of compassion, grounded on radical inclusiveness and reverence for all living things, and informed by her Jewish heritage of social justice. Many of their friends looked to the Eastern traditions, cultivating a discipline of Buddhist meditation and practicing Yoga.

When I was fourteen I moved to the Lama Foundation, an intentional community in the mountains of Northern New Mexico that celebrated all the world’s religious traditions. Known as the birthplace of the seminal book, *Be Here Now* by Ram Dass, which shifted the consciousness of the culture by translating five thousand years of Eastern thought into a contemporary American vernacular, Lama was a crucible for spiritual experience. At that time Lama was also running the alternative school my siblings and I attended in Taos, so my family had built a relationship of trust with the community that allowed me to leave home (a few miles away) to seek the connection with Spirit I had begun to crave.

There were a number of influences driving my yearning for the Divine. One was death. From a very young age I had experienced the loss of loved ones, and the mystery of death had opened a sense of proximity to the numinous. My brother Matty died of a brain tumor when he was ten and I was seven. My first love, Phillip, was killed in a gun accident when we were thirteen. And ever since I was a child I had an inclination toward solitude and stillness. I often escaped our communal household and fled into the arms of nature where I took refuge in quietude and wrote poetry. By the time I went to live at Lama, the inner world was more real to me than the external realities my peers were drawn to. While my friends were beginning to experiment with sex, drugs and rock and roll, I was falling in love with Krishna, god of Love.

I immersed myself in the monastic rhythms of the Lama community, rising at dawn to light a fire in the wood stove of my un-insulated A-Frame, then making my way through the aspen grove for silent group meditation in the adobe

kiva. I met Sufi sheiks and Kabbalistic masters, Vipassana teachers and Tibetan Lamas, indigenous shamans and Christian mystics. I immersed myself in the practices of Murshid Samuel Lewis, who created the Dances of Universal Peace, and the teachings of Inayat Khan, who founded the Sufi Order in the West. I studied sacred texts and sat in silence. It never occurred to me that any one path was more worthy or true than any other. They were all presented to me as being of equal value, equally valid paths home to the One who transcends all form. And that's how I have felt about the world's religions and their practitioners ever since.

### ***The Circle***

I know I am not alone in this. Decades after my formation at Lama, I find myself at home in this emerging phenomenon known as interspirituality. A circle of seekers is coalescing around the world to celebrate a reorientation from religious separation to interspiritual connection. While many of us have been pilgrims on this path for decades—sometimes feeling alone in the wilderness, sometimes gathering with others who are similarly drawn to worshipping the sacred in every single holy house we encounter--now, at last, our numbers seem to be reaching a tipping point and what was a fringe phenomenon is becoming a global movement.

The interspiritual movement is characterized as much by what it is not as what it is. It is not a new religion; in fact many of its most enthusiastic adherents consider themselves “spiritual but not religious.” It has no creed or dogma, no tenets or prohibitions. No special attire sets it apart and no single symbol represents its core philosophy. Its membership is as diverse as the full spectrum of humanity. It is not about belief, but action. And the only action required is love.

The term “interspiritual” was coined by the late Brother Wayne Teasdale in his book, *The Mystic Heart*. Brother Wayne initiated a dialog that transcends religiosity and speaks to the common heart of spiritual experience across traditional faith boundaries. While some of us emphasize the passionate poetry of the mystics, others synthesize the rigors of science with the insights of religion to offer a powerful vision of a dawning collective consciousness—one that opens the way for universal justice and stewardship of the earth.

The work of interspirituality is finding expression among established faith traditions as well as those who do not subscribe to any religious institution yet burn with love for the sacred. Artists are collaborating with scientists, musicians are praising God in every language, and filmmakers are documenting grassroots peace movements all in the name of celebrating spiritual diversity and welcoming the stranger. This movement is grounded in the balance of action and contemplation. Personal awakening is galvanized by virtue of a radical commitment to being of service in the world. Many groups, guided by well-known visionaries and unknown prophets, are harvesting the fruits of personal spirituality to feed to a hungry world.

Critics of religious pluralism have questioned the validity of looking for the unifying scriptures, beliefs, and practices at the heart of all the world's religions. They suggest that those of us who are dedicated to interspirituality, in our efforts to be inclusive and give each faith an equal voice, run the risk of diluting all that rich diversity and ending up with a mealy mush that tastes sweetish but lacks any real substance. This analysis strikes me as an artifact of Aristotle's Law of the Excluded Middle--in other words, a malady of the Western mind. It ignores the very real fact that seemingly mutually exclusive propositions, on closer examination and engaging the tools of radical inquiry, reveal a common wisdom at their core. This is the Paradox of the Perennial!

### ***Don't Drink the Poison***

The way I see it is that those of us from the Western traditions—the “Children of Abraham”—have inherited a legacy of grappling with the Mystery. Drawing on the biblical story of Jacob struggling all night with an angel of the Divine and being re-named Israel (God-wrestler), we are inclined to question what we are taught about the spiritual life. This is not sacrilege: it is our sacred birthright. We are endowed with the faculty of discrimination so that we

might test Truth in the purifying fire of inquiry and so galvanize our own tools for awakening. Informed by timeless wisdom teachings and equipped with spiritual technologies carefully engineered over millennia by the world's religions (such as prayer, meditation, chanting), our task is to activate the universal laws of love that connect and redeem us.

We are like bees in a garden. We make our way from blossom to blossom, gathering nectar from cherry trees and African poppies, collecting the healing balm of calendula and lavender and the sweet elixir of strawberries and lily-of-the-valley. We avoid the toxic weeds. That's just common sense. From this careful (and ideally joyful) activity of dipping and gathering, we are able to engage in the alchemical process that transmutes raw pollen into rich honey, with which we then sustain ourselves and nurture the world. And we are cross-pollinating as we go, participating in the creation of a diverse, robust and sustainable ecosystem.

And so it is with the life of Spirit. We encounter different faiths and excavate and sift to find the jewels that lie at the heart of each tradition. Every religion contains a treasure trove of wisdom teachings and transformational practices, and each one is also burdened with divisive messages and a history of violence and oppression. My advice is dive down and lift up the teachings of love, and *don't drink the poison*.

Here is what I find so powerful—even revolutionary—about the Interspiritual Movement. It does not insist that all the world's religions are *the same*. Rather, it reveals that all the world's religions recognize and proclaim that *all beings are one*. It is in this sense that the Interspiritual Path is *unifying*. And during these times of strife (that is, the entire course of human history) we need this unifying power more urgently than ever.

The key is to drop from the head to the heart. The difference between “interfaith” and “interspiritual” has to do with observation versus participation. Historically, the interfaith Movement has served a vital peacemaking function in which ordained representatives of established religions gather to exchange the essential doctrines of their own tradition and to listen with respect to the beliefs of others. While the Interfaith Movement has emphasized an intellectual orientation toward other faiths with the goal of building understanding and mutual tolerance, the Interspiritual Movement is about direct experience with the practices that transform us.

I don't want to tolerate you. I want to have a direct encounter with the spirit of the Divine in the form in which you adore it and be forever changed by what you love. I'm not interested in your cordial appreciation of my ancestral tradition. I want to invite you to fast with me on Yom Kippur and sing the ancient prayers in Hebrew as the Gates of Heaven close once more and we are sealed into the Book of Life for another year.

### ***Welcoming the Stranger***

As I travel and speak about the God of Love, reading aloud from diverse scriptures and mystical poetry, chanting the Divine Names in every sacred language and inviting people into the stillness where all theologies dissolve, I find a common hunger for connection. We long for the Holy One and we crave community. While we may be rooted in a primary religious tradition, we carry a secret sense that all paths lead us home. During the open exchanges in my talks and retreats, Roman Catholic priests convey the beauty that washed over them when they participated in the Jewish Sabbath prayers, Muslims praise the holiness of Sermon on the Mount, and atheists describe the resonance in every cell of their bodies when they sing *Kyrie Eleyson*.

This is not mere appreciation of the belief system of the other. It is a whole-hearted, fully embodied, humbly surrendered encounter with the universal heart of the Divine. It is an immersion in Love Itself. The way of love is rigorous and demanding. It is not a path for the faint-hearted. It requires more courage and fortitude to drop our preconceptions and enter the mystery than it does to attach ourselves to a defined wisdom way. It is a risk to loosen our grip on a particular school of thought and open our hearts to unfamiliar rituals in other languages.

The fruits of interspiritual connection are more than worth the danger of extending ourselves beyond our comfort zones. Strangers become family. Ancestral enmities lose their power. Weariness lifts and stale spirits are revitalized. Souls catch fire and ignite each other. I see this wherever I go. It fills me with hope for a new humanity, one that affirms its essential interconnectedness and cannot help but respond to the needs of all beings and act on the urge to mend the torn fabric of creation.

The message I received in my youth was, "It's very nice that you love all the spiritual traditions, Mirabai, but eventually you are going to have to choose one and *go deep*." As if my passionate attraction to manifold expressions of the ineffable precluded depth. As if I were being a dilettante when what I was actually experiencing with each ritual and every ceremony was a profound and transformational encounter with the source of love. I *tried* to choose one. But each time I made the effort to devote myself exclusively to a path I experienced intense aversion, accompanied by a sense that I was violating some essential covenant with my Beloved. To choose one form felt like a rejection of the Formless One I love.

I am a Jew with a three-decade Buddhist sitting practice, a lifelong devotion to the Hindu sage Neem Karoli Baba, have taken initiation in two different Sufi Orders and translate the teachings of the Catholic mystics into accessible English. Like my namesake, the sixteenth century poet saint Mirabai, I have a driving devotional impulse and ecstatic inclinations. And I am equally drawn to the deep quiet of the unitive state in which lover and Beloved merge and rest together in emptiness. I used to be troubled by this apparent paradox. I should be either a Bhakti (devotional) yogi or an Advaita Vedantist (non-dualist). A Sufi or a Buddhist. An activist or a contemplative. There seemed to be no place at the table for people like me.

Now I am beginning to find my circle. We are everywhere! We love the Beloved in any and every disguise. And we love Him (Her) most when they are naked, and we are naked too. Stripped of preconceptions, empty of spiritual attachments, unsupported by theological constructs. The teachings of the mystics of every tradition speak of the annihilating power of love, and the necessity of being burned by the fire of transformation so that we can have a direct encounter with the source of Love itself. Being present to the Mystery means being released from the bonds of the separate self. This kind of liberation is difficult when we think one religion alone contains the secrets of the universe and that we know what they are.

Each of the world's great religions has been responsible for some of the most horrendous violations in the history of so-called civilization. We are right to demand accountability. And yet it would be a mistake, I believe, to reject all faith traditions as a result of the misuse of power committed by the religious hierarchy. There are great storehouses of wisdom and beauty in the Holy Houses of the world's religions. Practices that connect us with deep currents of spiritual longing and mystical union. Simple, practical teachings on social justice and environmental stewardship. Recipes for transforming consciousness and healing the earth. The interspiritual movement winnows this bounty and invites the whole world to the feast.

~ Mirabai Starr