

## Religious Diversity on the Spiritual Path

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I STARTED INTERFAITH WORK when I was three years old. Descended from Scottish Presbyterians, my Unitarian Universalist (UU) parents enrolled me in a preschool at the local synagogue. I was raised with intellectual northerners who were open to different ways of thinking and expression and were not overtly spiritual. The UUs draw mainly from the Judeo-Christian heritage, though one of the nineteenth century's most famous UU ministers, Ralph Waldo Emerson, studied and took to heart the Hindu writings of the Bhagavad Gita. There is an appreciation of ritual and service, tradition and study, community outreach and religious education. In Sunday School we read, discussed, debated, and analyzed the Bible; celebrated Jewish holidays; and learned the symbolism of Eastern traditions. My first visit to a Buddhist community was when I was about thirteen, a field trip of our church's Sunday School. The Barre Center for Buddhist Studies, a Vipassana retreat center, introduced us to sitting and walking meditation and to the concept of a silent retreat directed only by a bell ringing. In fact, I remember that an entire year of Sunday School was spent visiting neighboring churches and religious communities. Our UU church, the second oldest parish in Worcester, Massachusetts, is certainly rooted in the Christian faith,

but members participate without signing on to any particular belief or creed. It is up to the UU individual to discover his or her own "personal theology" ([www.uu.org](http://www.uu.org)), whereas the community's role is to support the individual in this journey. Equipped with a value system that accepted many coexisting responses to the deepest questions of life, I began to understand the weight of the responsibility and freedom of this search. As poet Rainer Maria Rilke might say, I began to "live the questions."

As a teenager I began to study spiritual writings on my own. I read *Handbook to Higher Consciousness* by Ken Keyes Jr., when I was sixteen. Keyes's philosophy combined Christian, Buddhist, and Hindu teachings and gave sound bites for the beginner on the spiritual path. I met a young mystic who led me to an experience of interconnectedness with nature. I gradually stopped eating meat. I started studying and practicing yoga. I constantly questioned the nature of reality and sought to experience it more deeply.

As a freshman at Harvard I explored various introductory humanities courses, such as anthropology and psychology, but was utterly captivated by the study of religion. My first course was Diana Eck's *Introduction to World Religions: Diversity and Dialogue*. As I was exposed in rigorous academic coursework to the spectrum of belief systems, I continued in my extracurricular time to participate in spiritual study. I became more involved with yoga and meditation classes, and I joined a shamanic practice group at Harvard's Center for the Study of World Religions. Furthermore, my part-time job as an undergraduate was to help with collecting data for the Pluralism Project, Professor Eck's research into religious communities in America. On many levels, I was fascinated by the spiritual experience and its expression by communities around the globe. Some would say I was majoring in religion. I would say religion was majoring in me.

In my sophomore year, I met my guru. I was taking Professor Eck's course *Hindu Myth, Image and Pilgrimage* in which she announced that a Christian, Jewish Guru who works with people with AIDS was going to be speaking at the Divinity School in an evening lecture.

Fascinated, I showed up. The room was packed as incense burned, and large photos of bedridden patients surrounded the room. Ma Jaya Sati Bhagavati (Ma) entered, immediately declaring, "The accent's Brooklyn!" Ma was all energy, all movement, all passion. She was compassion and humor. She told stories of the dying, of laughing and crying with them in their final days. She would seamlessly shift into a deep and silent meditation, bringing the room to a warm silence. It is impossible to summarize her presence and presentation. It was experiential. I was blown away and curious. She was almost too much for me. But I wanted more. She had devotion. She had no fear. In the midst of a silent meditation, I felt my heart explode.

I met Ma after the second talk she gave at Harvard, and she invited me to her ashram, Kashi, in Florida, to learn more about her work. I took her up on her offer for two weeks in the summer of 1994. Ma's story is truly unique and extraordinary. No one can tell it the way she can, but I will try to summarize it briefly. Ma had forged a way to combine and teach the diverse spiritual lineages of her life and to share her passion for humanity. Born to Jewish parents, and losing her mother at a young age, she spent her young life on Coney Island, befriending the people she calls her first spiritual teachers: four black homeless people under the boardwalk. As a teenager she married a Catholic, and in her thirties she began yoga classes to lose weight. Intense breath-work catalyzed her into a mystical visitation of Jesus Christ, and later she met Swami Nityananda and Baba Neem Karoli, her guru. Nothing in her life experience in that point had introduced her to Hindu philosophy or teachings, and her life rapidly changed. Over the past thirty years, she has continued to teach and share her experiences. In 1976 she founded Kashi Ashram, an interfaith spiritual community rooted in her teachings, in Sebastian, Florida.

Over the past nine and one-half years I have continued to study with Ma, and for nearly six years I have lived at Kashi Ashram. I would say that Ma's basic philosophy does not conflict with that with which I was raised. In both there is a strong emphasis on service to humanity and celebration of a variety of spiritual paths. A similar value is placed

on spiritual community, traditions, and rituals. The main cultural difference, I would say, is the additional expression of Hindu ritual in her community. The vocabulary on the ashram is what I call "Ma's Brooklynese Sanskrit." *Puja* is moving prayer, sometimes at the *dhunis* (fire hearths), sometimes at the temples and shrines; *darshan* is when we see Ma in a community (*satsang*) setting; the spiritual names she gives her students, such as my own, Annapurna, are usually (though not always) names of Hindu deities or aspects of the Divine. The Hindu concept of the guru, or spiritual teacher, was new to me as well. It took a little time to adjust to living in such a large community and its energy, but the essence of Kashi has never felt foreign to me; on the contrary, it has always felt like home.

The Kashi community has offered opportunities to engage with the worldwide interfaith movement. Since 1994, Ma has been a trustee of the Council for the Parliament of the World's Religions, an interfaith organization headquartered in Chicago. The CPWR organizes large conferences every five years. For the 1999 Parliament in Cape Town, South Africa, Kashi organized a delegation of which I was a part. As a young adult, I applied and was accepted into the Next Generation Assembly Team, a group of youth from around the world and from various traditions. It was the most intensive interfaith team-building experience I had ever been involved with. Led by passionate and sensitive facilitators, such as Patrice Brodeur, Josh Borkin, and Eboo Patel, this group of thirty-five young people produced a presentation in six days that rocked the Parliament to its core. In a simple and profound way, we introduced ourselves to the Assembly of Religious Leaders and stated our commitments to changing our corners of the world. We formed a circle around the leaders at their tables and passed the wireless mike, speaking one at a time—Muslim, Sikh, Christian, Jew, Hindu, Native African, on and on. We expressed commitments to small changes, or to continuing what was already begun: mentoring, praying, working in the arts, becoming better on our own paths, sharing what we had experienced in Cape Town. That circle remains for me a circle of solidarity and interfaith prayer and support for everything that I do. Knowing

that my peers and friends, all over the world, are back in their home countries continuing in their work is sometimes enough to keep me going through the challenges of this work.

The following story illustrates a moment in my life when my spiritual path was affected by an experience I had in a religious setting that was new to me. I was a guest in a black Pentecostal church, not far from the ashram where I live. A co-worker, Lisa, at an arts summer camp whom I had known and worked with for two years had invited me. I had a healthy respect for Lisa and her work with children; trusted and admired her style of love, protection, and enjoyment of the campers. Lisa and I had set up the visit ahead of time, and, as it turned out, the visit coincided with the first Sunday after September 11, 2001. I had been feeling shattered by the events that had occurred. The sense of trauma, tragedy, and fear, as well as the media images, had not stopped. The moment I entered Lisa's church, I was lovingly embraced and welcomed along with the friends from the ashram who had come with me. The only white (including one Jewish) folks in the small church, we were warmly encouraged to participate and share in the service. For the first time since the shocking events had occurred, I felt a deep sense of peace and safety. Why? The congregants voiced a strong faith, which held them in a place that lacked any fear. The sermon that day taught me: "Why fear? We have God when we are alive; we have God when we are dead." I realized that terrorism can make you afraid only if you let it. The faith and wisdom of a people terrorized for centuries had brought them beyond fear, and this small congregation in the deep South, far from the large northern cities, was not allowing itself to be terrorized. I was very grateful for the lessons I received that day from my neighbors and from our common divine source.

The opportunity to share my perceptions and stories in this forum of young interfaith travelers has urged me to continue asking two related questions: (1) Who is "the other?" and (2) in the words of the mantra of Hindu sage Ramana Maharshi, "Who am I?" I wonder: Where does the delineation occur between "me" and "another"? Who draws the line? What makes one neighbor "different" from me and an-

other "the same"? Contemporary Zen teacher Roshi Bernie Glassman draws from a rich Buddhist tradition that challenges the same issue. When asked in an interview, "What's the source of the ... profound commitment that you have to alleviate the suffering of others?" he responded, "I don't see them as others. It's pretty egocentric. I want to have less suffering!" (*What Is Enlightenment?* Magazine interview by Andrew Cohen, [www.wie.org](http://www.wie.org)).

Glassman's reality includes such interdependence between beings that he sees all suffering as his own—and shared. Ramana Maharshi and Glassman touch on a view echoed in many of the world's traditions: that duality and separation are misperceptions, and that spiritually is only interconnected oneness. Emerson calls it the Oversoul. While this teaching resonates with me spiritually, nonetheless I feel that in the realm of interfaith work we need to celebrate and respect different perceptions and expressions of truth. As a child I was influenced by the appreciation of multiple forms of worship, and as an adult I continue to learn each time I am introduced to a new worldview.