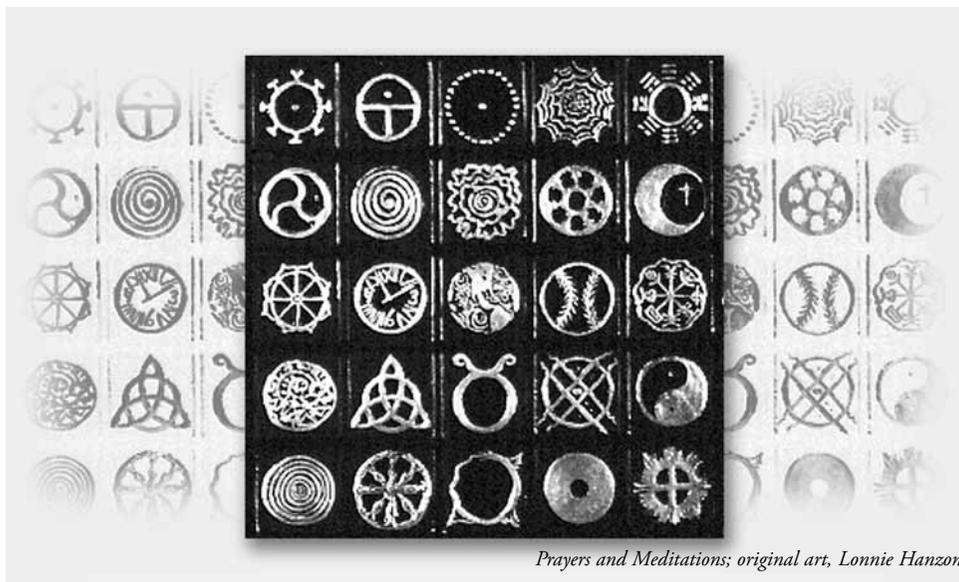


Creating Integral Prayers and Meditations

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Prayers and Meditations; original art, Lonnie Hanzon

When I was growing up, it seemed that you had to be great sage or saint to write a prayer. Indeed, most of the prayers we recited in our family synagogue were composed by some of the most enlightened human beings to walk this earth: Moses, David, the Sages of the Great Assembly, and the Kabbalists of Safed. But when I moved to the San Francisco Bay Area in my early thirties, I discovered Jewish Renewal, a small but growing movement that unites mystical teachings and practices with progressive views and values. Unlike the major denominations, Jewish Renewal does not have a standard prayer book. Rather, each congregation has its own collection of traditional and creative prayers. These creative prayers are written not only by Renewal rabbis but also by lay members.

My growing involvement in Renewal inspired me to try my hand at writing prayers. Initially, I wrote prayers for my congregation but soon realized I was not just interested in creating liturgy for Jewish worship services. I wanted to create prayers, as

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well as meditations, with more universal appeal and impact. Indeed, one of the reasons I had left Orthodox rabbinical school at age twenty two was the excessive focus on the history, obligations, and redemption of the Jews. Around the time that I discovered Jewish Renewal, I also began developing an integrative spiritual path that included Buddhist

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teachings and meditations, as well as the creative arts and the natural world. Over time, I also become deeply involved in Sufi and Christian communities. As an integral practitioner, I cared about all of humanity, not just the Jews. I wanted to compose devotional works that touched a wide range of people, so I started writing prayers and meditations for the interfaith gatherings I was already participating in. My intention was to create a shared spiritual experience for individuals of diverse religious heritages.

It occurred to me that I could attempt to do this in different ways. One way was to incorporate divine names from different faiths into a single prayer or meditation. The use of multiple names would signify diversity-in-unity and the basic equality of those names – all referred to the ineffable Source of Existence. Though this approach strongly appealed to me personally – because I was consciously

working on developing intimate relationships with divine names from many traditions – it was not generally effective for others. Most people have an intimate connection with only a few divine names, usually from their own tradition, and they are not comfortable with or drawn to divine names from other traditions. When other names are used, they may experience unease, dissonance,

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resistance, or even rejection. Moreover, many Buddhists are uncomfortable with any divine names at all. States of dissonance and discomfort are not conducive to devotional presence, which usually involves undivided attention, deep surrender, and full engagement. Indeed, I discovered that my multi-name prayers and meditations work best in communities that are already strongly committed to interfaith and integral activities. Interfaith communities associated with the University of Creation Spirituality and the Chaplaincy Institute for Arts and Interfaith Ministries were already “primed” for such integrative forms of devotion by their study of different religions, their exposure to various religious practices, and their commitment to an inclusive spiritual outlook. I think that such priming – such mental and emotional preparation – is crucial to making integral worship a truly transformative experience. At a minimum, priming involves explaining the integrative intent

and approach behind the prayer or meditation before introducing it.

A second approach that I took to creating integral prayers and meditations was to refrain from using traditional divine names altogether and instead to employ more universal terms like “Source of Life”, “Infinite One”, “Supreme Reality”, “Living Power” etc. This approach was more effective for a wider range of congregations probably because it didn’t require an introductory explanation and because worshippers seemed to connect more easily and deeply with these more familiar terms. An example is the prayer “Master of Endurance”:

*O Master of Endurance,
sustainer of the universe,
you keep heavenly bodies orbiting
in their arcs
and earthly beings journeying
on their paths.*

*“Onward and onward!”
is your decree,
deeper and deeper
into the heart
of existence.*

*A berry falls yet rises up
as a new cherry tree.
An explorer tumbles down
yet stands up again to continue
her lifelong expedition.
A widower crumples into tears
for years
until one day he discovers
a new zest for living.*

*Blessed is the ever Enduring
One,
sustainer of existence and uplifter
of life.*

I favor this more universal approach to creating prayers and meditations because it seems to touch a greater diversity of people.

I also composed prayers and meditations that aimed at creating a sacred sense of oneness but that did not use any religious language at all. Instead, I used the universal language of nature. Even atheists and agnostics can relate to the experience of unity in nature. One example of this third approach is the meditation “Inner Universe”. I asked congregants to begin by taking a few slow deep breaths and then to focus on the breath at the nose or the mouth. Then I slowly ready the meditation while being in a meditative state myself:

*Hear the soft soughing wind
in the sound of your own breath.*

*Feel the rolling rivers and sauntering streams
flowing freely through your veins.*

*Touch the roots of the oak
anchoring
your soles to the firm, rich earth.*

*See the grass and grains of the fields
sprouting in your pores.*

*Smell the lilies and lilacs and
lavenders*

*in the fragrance of your own
musk.*

*Feel the sun's pulsing life force
in the rising and setting of your
belly.*

*Gaze upon the ocean waves fill-
ing
and releasing your lungs.*

*Hear the harmonies of the galax-
ies
in the humming of your heart.*

*Touch the smooth, sloping hills
of your shoulders.*

*Taste the sea salt on the contours
of your tongue.*

*See the morning star and the
evening star
shining through your eyes.*

*Hear the squirrels chattering in
your busiest,
dizziest thoughts.*

*Gaze upon the light-hearted
seagulls
of your imagination soaring,
swerving, sailing.*

*Behold the lightning flash of your
intuition.*

*Witness the manifold forms of
creation
weaving and sustaining your
being.*

This meditation generally produces an experience that is both peaceful and enlivening.

I learned that one of the keys to leading a prayer or meditation is to be in a prayerful or meditative state oneself. The leader's state of consciousness is probably more important than the words recited, but a poorly constructed prayer or meditation can distract or annoy congregants and so hinder the transformation of their hearts and minds. My prayers and meditations vary significantly in quality. The best test of their quality is their impact on worshippers. I only repeat those that have a significant transformative effect. I also continually refine them just as I would continually refine a poem or a story.

One of my favorite meditations is entitled "Oneness". I have used it with several different groups and am grateful it often touches people's hearts. In it the divine "I" speaks:

Close your eyes and take some deep, slow breaths. Then let yourself breathe naturally, keeping your attention on the in-breaths and out-breaths and pauses between. Every breath is the spirit wind sustaining all life. Every cell of your body is the divine life seeking worldly expression. Every thought, feeling, sensation and intuition is the infinite intelligence seeking to know itself through you.

*In the beginnings
I am
and in the endings
I am
every finish but a pause
every start but a push*

*or pull
of infinite pulsations
of endless cyclings and recyclings
birthings and buryings
bloomings and bustings*

*All I see is I
I is all I see
all always all
always each
always all*

*Each a part, a portal,
a prism*

*Enter a leaf
you are there
Enter a root
you are here
Branch, trunk, fruit
Tree of life*

*Earth is sun's
dark condensed
rays
Sun is earth's
light loosened
dust*

*Waves dissolve
into particles
Particles dance
into waves*

*Can you see an apple,
without seeing the branch,
the sun, the dirt, the ants,
the spring rain, the clouds,
the nearby lake, the distant sea,
the farmer, the trucker, the steel
plant,*

*the rubber plantation,
the marketplace?*

*I am the mother and the baby
and the flow of joy between
I am the mammaries and the
milk
and the mouth that sucks blind*

*The trees are my thick hairs,
the mountains muscled bone,
the seas fragrant sweat
the winds living breathe*

*I split myself to see myself
to know my nature
to gaze upon my face
to proclaim my facets*

*With division I multiply
With difference I make sense*

*One to act, another to react
One to be, another to become
One to know, another to be
known*

*I make worlds out of yearning
for partners in dance*

*Worlds whirl out
and worlds whirl in
but never do I release
both hands*

*Lovewrestling is the combat
I love most
I rip my stillness
to make delirious dance
and score my quietude
to make uproarious song*

*Chaos is my free play
order my moment of rest*

*I splinter my eye
to make points of view
I gather my eyes
to know myself
completely*

*I burn and burn
consuming myself
spreading out my wealth
that all may be
light*

*Everyone
a ray
rooted
in my burning
heart*

*Everyone
a root
arrayed
with my fire*

*My heart a bright home
an incandescent loam*

.....

*As you open your eyes and look
around you,
behold all the numinous and
luminous
expressions of the One!*

In all nearly all of my prayers and meditations I try to create an awareness of the Oneness that composes, unites, and transcends all beings. And many of my prayers call for the Holy One to heal, bless and uplift all beings. Indeed, one prayer written in 2003 begins “Always pray for the good of all!”

I am convinced that the creative arts play an essential role in integral spirituality. Authentic integration can only occur through inspired creative fusion. Spirit is creative, the universe is creative, and the human creative spirit is needed to birth new spiritual insights, new practices, new rituals, new prayers, new meditations, new songs, new poems, new paintings, new films, new dances, new stories, new myths, new relationships, new social reforms, and new ecological revolutions.

Creative Oneness; original art, Lonnie Hanzon

