

Bridges: photos, Cetta Kenney



## Six Senses of “Interfaith Spirituality”

Charles Michael Burack

“interfaith” to refer to themselves and their work. I am one of these individuals and am involved with several interfaith organizations, communities and gatherings. Since many global conflicts are driven by religious strife, an ecumenical religious response is critical. I believe that interreligious activities can help bring about greater understanding, healing and peace.

In surveying the current interfaith scene, I have noticed that individuals and institutions often mean different things when using the term “interfaith.” I will explore six senses or types of “interfaith spirituality,” drawing on my own experiences and those of numerous friends, colleagues, students, clients, and fellow community members. These six senses reveal some of the ways in which interfaith spirituality is understood and practiced today.

(1) Interfaith spirituality is often understood as an activity that brings together individuals of different faiths for the purpose of creating greater understanding, appreciation, harmony or unity. In interfaith dialogues, individuals often discuss their differences and commonalities and build new understandings and alliances.

We are living in a broken world in which new dialogues, exchanges, alliances and integrations are urgently needed. Amidst the fragmentation, conflict and internecine violence, there are now many spiritually committed individuals and institutions that are beginning to use the term

*Dr. Charles Burack is on the faculty of Naropa University, Oakland, and Matthew Fox's University of Creation Spirituality. A widely published writer and award-winning scholar, he is actively involved in interfaith education, arts and counselling.*

Fairly clear boundaries are maintained between the faiths. The different communities aren't trying to convert each other, nor are they trying to create an amalgamated religion. There is a verbal sharing of ideas, values and concerns, but the communities' basic religious beliefs and practices remain intact and unchanged. Rarely do the communities borrow rituals, prayers, scriptures, or meditations from one another. The main change is that each faith community becomes more understanding, tolerant or appreciative of the others. Often, a new sense of closeness and commonality is felt,

When religious communities join together for a common cause, an even greater degree of communion is experienced and achieved. Interfaith service projects and worship ceremonies

and a spirit of cooperation is born. Some of these dialogues are sponsored by local and regional interfaith councils.

When religious communities join together for a common cause, an even greater degree of communion is experienced and achieved. Interfaith service projects and worship ceremonies are wonderful ways for people to connect and transform the world and themselves. These projects and ceremonies can form subtle, deep connections that dialogue alone cannot create. They are often initiated by fairly progressive churches and synagogues, like Glide Memorial Church and Beyt Tikkun in San Francisco. The United Religions Initiative also sponsors many interfaith activities. And the Council for a Parliament of the World's Religions is dedicated to promoting interreligious encounter, dialogue and cooperation globally. All of this work is crucial for creating local, national and international peace.

(2) I am a teacher and counselor at two

interfaith universities (Naropa University, Oakland, and Matthew Fox's University of Creation Spirituality), an interfaith seminary (The Chaplaincy Institute for Arts and Interfaith Ministries), and an integral institute (California Institute of Integral Studies). I teach courses on sacred literature, creative writing, spiritual counseling, Kabbalah, interfaith spirituality, and revisioning work. For many of the individuals I work with, the term “interfaith” announces that their spiritual path is powerfully shaped by more than one spiritual tradition. This second sense of “interfaith” is synonymous

with “multifaith.”

I know many individuals born Jewish whose spiritual paths are also significantly informed by Buddhism, Sufism, Hinduism, Taoism, Christianity, or one of the Native American religions. Some attend both synagogue and ashram, temple and mosque, shul and sweat lodge. Terms like “BuJew” and “Jewfi” have appeared in the media to refer to such individuals, but the individuals themselves are less inclined to use these terms. I also work with many Christians whose paths are shaped by one or more of the other major religions.

My own spiritual path is rooted in mystical Judaism, powerfully influenced by Buddhism, and significantly informed by other religions, by nature, and by the creative arts. As a Renewal Jew, I celebrate the Sabbath and Holidays, recite Hebrew blessings at meals, pray the Shema and other Hebrew prayers daily, study and teach Kabbalah, and do Kabbalistic and Chasidic

chants and meditations. Since 1994, Buddhism has deeply influenced my path. I practice mindfulness and Vipassana (insight) meditation daily. Mindfulness is the practice of being attentive and awake to what is occurring in the present moment. Vipassana is a simple “bare attention” technique for observing the sensations, thoughts and feelings that arise and pass away in one's stream of consciousness. I have also incorporated powerful practices from Sufism, Hinduism and Christianity. Indeed, the Sufi chant “La ilaha illa ‘llah” (“there is no God but God”); or “there is nothing but God”) is

One woman told me she was born a human being, not a Jew. Since her natural parents were Jewish, she was raised as a Jew. But she insists that she started out life as a human being and only gradually became – was made into, socialized as – a Jew. Today, she still considers herself a Jew, but also knows herself to be more than a Jew because other religions contribute importantly to who she is and what she does. This view is not accepted by many traditional Jews. Some would insist that her soul is Jewish even before it enters the physical world.

(4) A fourth sense of “interfaith” is

are wonderful ways for people to connect and transform the world and themselves. These projects and ceremonies can form subtle, deep connections that dialogue alone cannot create.

crucial to my daily practice, and “Allah” is one of my favorite divine names. Occasionally, I attend Hindu *kirtans* and incorporate some of these chants in my daily practice. Regularly, I read scriptures from the world's religions and find the *Bhagavad Gita*, *Tao Te Ching*, *Torah*, and poems of Rumi to be endless sources of inspiration. Taking long walks in nature, as well as expressing spirit through writing, singing, dancing, teaching, and counseling, are also central to my daily spiritual practice.

(3) Many individuals who refer to themselves as “interfaith” are declaring that they have a larger spiritual identity than that described by their birth religion. For them, “interfaith” is a more expansive and inclusive identity than is “Jewish” or “Christian” or “Muslim” and announces that they place their humanity before or above their Jewish, Christian or Muslim heritage. Some of the Renewal Jews I know, including myself, identify with this third sense of “interfaith.”

emphasizes the core spiritual ideas and values that most mystical traditions share. It is the area of spiritual overlap, what the post-modern theologian Matthew Fox calls “deep ecumenism”: the spiritual principles and practices of love, wisdom, compassion, justice, peace, forgiveness, goodness, beauty, silence, expression, creativity, harmony, truth, courage, transcendence, immanence, prayer, contemplation, life, health, strength, and unity. Most traditions speak of a Creator or Creative Process that creates a universe filled with precious and awesome beings that deserve our respect, love and reverence. This deep ecumenical approach is practiced at the interfaith institutions where I work. Many of the courses highlight the life-affirming values and practices in the world's religions.

It is also true that most religious traditions harbor life-destroying tendencies. These negative commonalities – widely shared shadows – need to squarely faced,

## Six Senses of “Interfaith Spirituality”

worked with and overcome. How essential it is for the religions and nations of the earth to unite our life-affirming energies to tame and transform our deadly urges! I believe that our collective shadows can only be understood and transfigured when we build on the powerful care, trust and joy generated by joint engagement in ritual, social service, and creative play. Without finding ways to tap our common virtues, visions and joys, we will not have the strength, insight or conviction to overcome the power of our deep-seated prejudices.

(5) “Interfaith” suggests not only what different religions share but also indicates the universal Ground that encompasses them all. “Inter” literally means “between” and so can indicate the space between religions, which is in fact an all-encompassing space. Analogously, postmodern science shows us that space is not just the emptiness between things; it is the infinite, encompassing arena in which fields of energy interact, create, dissolve, transmute. This fifth meaning of “interfaith” is close to “universal.”

I believe that a more universal perspective is needed to encompass the diverse traditions. Indeed, it would be very beneficial for each religion to see other religions as different paths up the same mountain, different wells leading to the same underground spring, different rays of the one sun, different fingers of the same hand, different waves of the same sea. These metaphors have been used by various modern exponents of interfaith or integral spirituality: Sri Aurobindo, Hazrat Inayat Khan, Bede Griffith, Ana Perez-Chisti, and Andrew Harvey. These and related metaphors have also been used by progressive, ecumenical leaders of particular faiths or denominations: Matthew Fox, the Dalai Lama, Thich Nhat Hanh, Pema Chodron, Zalman Schachter-Shalomi,

Michael Lerner, and Lynn Gottlieb. Other integrative thinkers, like Ken Wilber, Michael Murphy and George Leonard, have been developing integral spiritual philosophies and practices, in part inspired by the integral yoga of Sri Aurobindo.

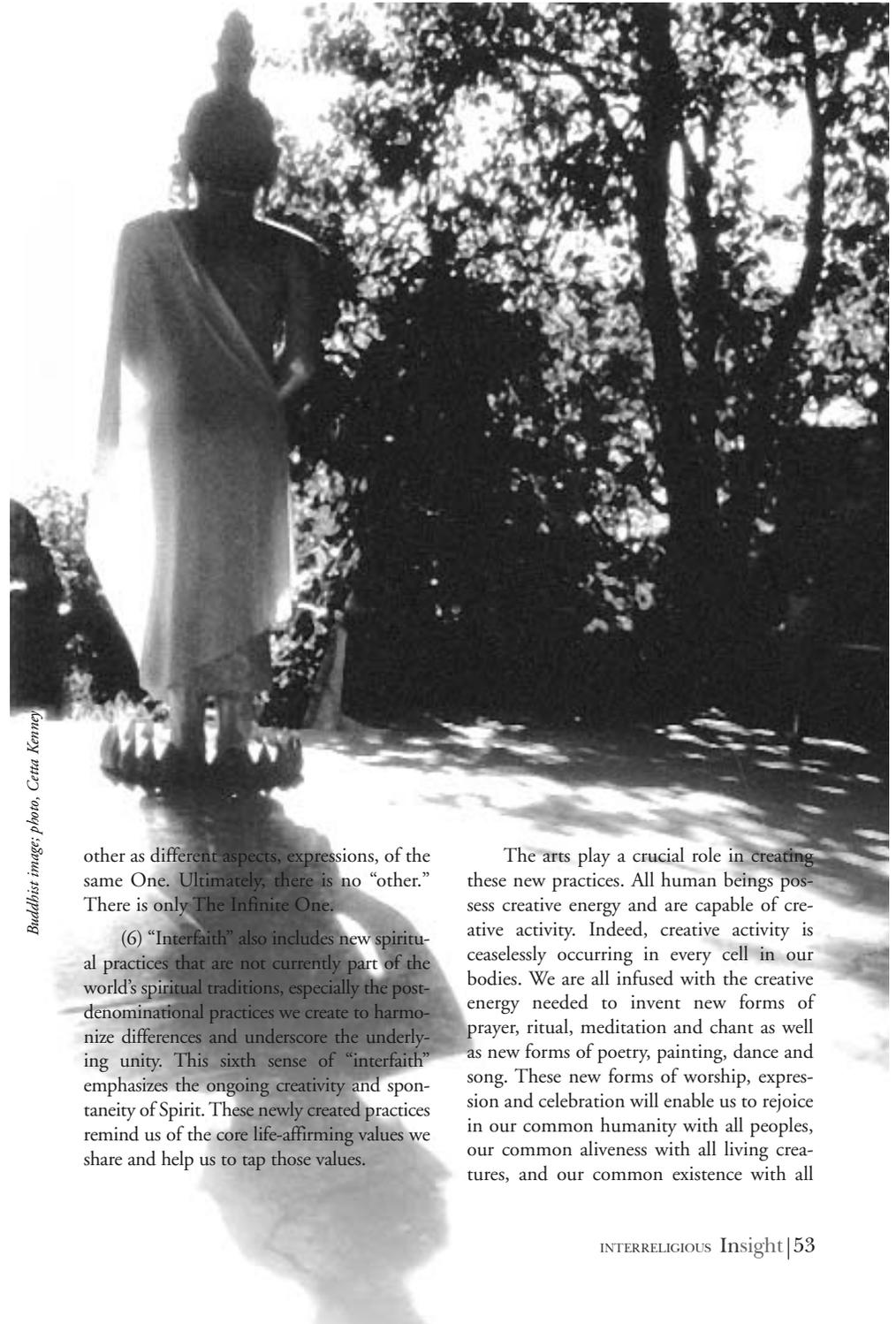
I don’t expect there to be agreement about the precise nature of this all-encompassing Ground or Source, but I do think it is important for all peoples to affirm the underlying Unity and to affirm their shared spiritual ideas and values. This affirmation will completely change the nature of religious conflict and transform dialogues around difference. When the all-pervasive Oneness is honored at the outset, conflicts are understood as opportunities for creating new, more embracing harmonies. Indeed, conflict and chaos are phases of an ever-evolving Unity that is seeking to diversify and articulate itself. Articulation is accomplished through diversification and specification.

It is important to emphasize that this universal spirituality is not monolithic. It is not based on a totalitarian ideology but on the fundamental spiritual experience of oneness and the basic consequences of that experience: compassion for and responsibility to all other creatures. The experience of essential unity and interconnectedness leads to the conviction that every human being is responsible for furthering the well-being of all beings. Doing good for one is doing good for all. One for one is one for all. This conviction is cosmological and ecological, not anthropocentric.

Our human-human discords are a reflection of our dualistic relationship with the nonhuman world. It is all a matter of how we view and treat “the other.” An ecological, interfaith approach sees self and

other as different aspects, expressions, of the same One. Ultimately, there is no “other.” There is only The Infinite One.

(6) “Interfaith” also includes new spiritual practices that are not currently part of the world’s spiritual traditions, especially the post-denominational practices we create to harmonize differences and underscore the underlying unity. This sixth sense of “interfaith” emphasizes the ongoing creativity and spontaneity of Spirit. These newly created practices remind us of the core life-affirming values we share and help us to tap those values.



Buddhist image: photo, Cetta Kenney

## Six Senses of "Interfaith Spirituality"

beings. They will also help us to grieve together and to work out our differences in a spirit of love and justice. In nearly all of the interfaith organizations that I'm involved with, creative approaches to ritual and art are central. In one organization the interfaith service includes improvisational singing and dance. Original poems, prayers and meditations are also shared. There are even hands-on healings and blessings tailored to the needs of the participants.

Much of my own creative energy is devoted to writing poems, prayers, meditations and stories that embody the spirit of The One that becomes the Many in order to become more fully the One. In my writings, I use many different sacred names from many different traditions. These writings blend and distinguish, unite and differentiate, various approaches to and languages for spirit. My constant prayer is that my work may serve the Will of The One. I sense that the Divine wants us to revere both unity and uniqueness.

Dreams, like art and ritual, are universal products of our endless creativity. The main difference is that dreams, unlike art and ritual, are generally not the result of conscious activity (though we can consciously affect our dreams through a practice known as lucid dreaming). Sharing our dreams with others is another powerful way to forge trust, understanding, compassion and community. Our dreams reveal our vulnerabilities as well as our gifts and inspirations. Dream work is an important activity in many of the institutions I work with. My colleague Jeremy Taylor is a powerful dream worker who brings a creative, interfaith awareness to his work. So does the dream worker Connie Kaplan.

I have been recording my dreams for

five years, and my work with them plays an important part in my spiritual path. My dreams show me what is really going on in the depths of my being. They reveal those soul places and forces often cut off from ordinary consciousness. They may also reveal what is going on in the collective psyche of the communities, countries and ecosystems I participate in. Often, the pain of other creatures is revealed. Our nightmares remind us that we threaten the lives of all species when we allow our actions to be driven by arrogance, alienation and aggression.

## CONCLUDING REMARKS

These six senses or forms of interfaith spirituality can be arranged in increasing degrees of integration. At one end of the spectrum are interfaith dialogues and exchanges between clearly distinct faiths. At the other end, are various forms of universal spirituality that minimize or disregard faith boundaries and denominational distinctions: the interfaith individual is free to draw on any or all religions as well as to discover and create new forms of spiritual expression and communion. In the middle of the spectrum, are various degrees of borrowings between religions and denominations as well as various degrees of incorporation and integration of those borrowings.

My prayer is that all human beings will honor each other – and all beings – as precious, irreplaceable offspring of The One. May we learn to appreciate the unique beneficence of every creature. May we learn to understand our differences in the context of essential unity. And may we learn to meet our needs, and deal with our discords, in a spirit of love and justice for all.