

We've been walking the streets of New York City and writing in the pages of *New York Spirit*, and its predecessor *Free Spirit*, for the last 20 years—long enough to observe the passage of profound historic changes.

We've seen the environmentally conscious frugality of the '70s erupt into the hedonistic materialism of the '80s, when it seemed that anything desirable could be found and bought somewhere on, or just off, the city's teeming, crime-ridden streets. We've witnessed the growth of that same self-serving era's conscientious subculture, the "New Age" movement, with its multiplicity of self-help classes and therapies, as well as the post-Three Mile Island peak of the antinuclear movement in the inundation of Central Park in 1982 with over a million protesters. We've watched the sweeping popular success, even the institutionalization, of what was as recently as the '60s still an eccentric idea—environmentalism—and the advent of government-supported recycling in even so profligate a place as this.

We've also lived through the transition to the digital euphoria of the '90s, with that decade's quick and massive accumulations of wealth. And we were there in Times Square for the turn of the millennium, shuddering through the premonitions of doom and dire prophecies of planetary computer breakdown.

The computers didn't break down exactly as predicted, but the economy they sustained imploded soon enough. Then, as though that were only a prelude to disaster, the city's highest towers—the tallest masts of the capitalist ship of state—were brought down in a catastrophic attack. We felt the psychic shock waves of mass murder in the neighborhood, inhaled the smoke of immolation in the air, and paid homage to the dead where the last shards of buildings protruded from the smoldering wreckage.

Over the last two years we've watched helplessly as ground that was sanctified by such enormous loss of life has been used for the advancement of political careers, the curtailment of civil liberties, and the waging of wars. What does it say about our culture that such desecration could have happened so quickly? Rather than seizing the opportunity to learn from disaster and remake ourselves so that it need never happen again, we've allowed our leaders to perpetuate and even cultivate our divisions and fears. The walls between us, as individuals and communities, have grown higher now, and are even harder to breach.

It was with these thoughts in mind that this column, *Kindred Spirits*, was conceived. At a time when anger and paranoia are finding their fullest expression in our national life, sources of positive inspiration, grown increasingly rare but still there and attainable, are more valuable than ever. Our common spirituality remains suppressed, but strains for release. What better time than now to consider on a regular basis the evidence that we can still find in this city of our basic human interdependence, our cooperative care for one another, our collective hope?

Our Common Ground

Philosophia Perennis . . . the metaphysic that recognizes a divine Reality substantial to the world of things and lives and minds; the psychology that finds in the soul something similar to, or even identical with, divine Reality; the ethic that places man's final end in the knowledge of the immanent and transcendent Ground of all being—the thing is immemorial and universal. Rudiments of the Perennial Philosophy may be found among the traditional lore of primitive peoples in every region of the world, and in its fully developed forms it has a place in every one of the higher religions.

—Aldous Huxley,
The Perennial Philosophy

If there is any one overarching characteristic that could be attributed to the

operations of politics, it is divisiveness. In politics, as in sports, there are always winners and losers. The victorious exult in their superiority, revel in the euphoria of their new importance, and swagger with pride. The defeated clench their jaws in grim determination to conceal their chagrin and disappointment, and begin immediately to plot their next campaign, to "get even." Sooner or later they will have their turn to exult in their superiority too.

It may all seem like childish games, and in fact there is a natural progression, and little distance to be jumped, from the playground to the playing field to the "political arena." But when "child's play" could describe the governance of a people and the administration of laws that make the difference in how they live and die, politics has become a wasteful and potentially harmful expenditure of energy.

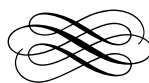
Religion is supposed to be about inclusiveness and unity—the antithesis of division. The very word, after all, breaks down etymologically into *re* and *legion*, or bringing people together again. Some religions are more unifying than others, but their highest level of realization and achievement, as described at great length by Huxley, is the recognition of our basic

oneness—in the Holy Spirit or with the Buddha Mind, as two of the world religions might put it; the "Ground of all being," as Huxley synthesized it—and the expression of peace, kindness, and compassion that arises from the elevated state of consciousness of an *open mind*.

But there is a gray and shady area in which politics and religion overlap and fuel each other's most divisive aspects, known as *fundamentalism*—"a movement or attitude stressing a strict and literal adherence to a set of basic principles," according to one dictionary. And that's only the beginning. The religious fundamentalist tends to morph all too easily from "strict and literal" to rigid and exclusive. The mind is closed.

Those who adhere to the sacred principles become another class of

Kindred Spirits



Affirming Our Interdependence

people: the "saved" or "the elect." In their eyes, those who don't adhere to the principles exactly, or who couldn't care less about them, become another class entirely—or less than human. Then it's a big-time game of winners and losers, then separation and exclusion—politics with a vengeance—and people start to get killed.

The Interfaith Perspective

The divine can mean no single quality, it must mean a group of qualities, by being champions of which in alternation, different men may all find worthy missions. Each attitude being a syllable in human nature's total message, it takes the whole of us to spell the meaning out completely.

—William James,
The Varieties of Religious Experience

New York City has a greater multiplicity of immigrant cultures and faiths than any other city in the world. In this living tapestry of human diversity, the common language, customs, and beliefs can change radically in a matter of blocks. The fundamentalist outlook doesn't do well here—in fact, it's probably the one place in the

world that is most reviled by fundamentalists, and has clearly become a target for their hatred—because out of necessity, for the sake of keeping the peace, the city is a hotbed of tolerance.

It's no coincidence that the Interfaith perspective, which cultivates respect for all religious faiths, understanding that they all share common truths, first took root in New York City as long ago as the 1970s and has flourished here in recent years. In particular, the more liberal religious institutions of Morningside Heights during the '70s and '80s—the "interdenominational" Riverside Church under the Reverend William Sloane Coffin, and the Episcopal but increasingly universalist Cathedral of St. John the Divine under the Reverend James Parks Morton—opened their doors to practitioners of human unity and encouraged the establishment of Interfaith organizations.

Those organizations, and others that have evolved from them, are more than ever promoting education in the beliefs and practices of other religious traditions. Operating on the assumption that there are deep structures underlying all faiths, as perceived by such visionaries as James and Huxley, these communities in New York today are cultivating a more inclusive spirituality and a more comprehensive spiritual practice that draws on the totality of religious traditions—including *fundamentalists*'. In spite of recent traumatic blows to the urban psyche, with this kind of work going on in its midst, New York City has the potential to become an exemplar to the world of how to live not just in mutual tolerance of other faiths but in open receptivity to the wisdom of all faiths.

A Faith Movement

We have seen how this emotion overcomes temperamental melancholy and imparts endurance to the Subject, or a zest, or a meaning, or an enchantment and glory to the common objects of life. The name of 'faith-state' . . . is a good one. It is a biological as well as a psychological condition, and Tolstoy is absolutely accurate in classing faith among the forces by which men live. The total absence of it, anhedonia, means collapse.

—William James,
The Varieties of Religious Experience

The most recent Interfaith organization to evolve in New York is the One Spirit Learning Alliance, which occupies a large space on the fifteenth floor of a building at 330 West 38th Street in midtown, only blocks away from Port Authority, Penn Station, and the Empire State Building—an area not well known for expressions of faith except on crowded street corners.

An ambitious "educational and spiritual organization," its overarching purpose, as defined by its executive director Diane Berke, is "to bring the Interfaith perspective and values, as well as the integration of ancient spiritual traditions with modern science and psychology . . . into the public conversation and public awareness." It sponsors programs for the general public, but, in this first year of its existence, has concentrated on its

One Spirit Interfaith Seminary—a two-year “professional development” training program for Interfaith ministry.

With an administrative staff of at least nine ordained Interfaith ministers who have years of teaching experience at other seminaries, it’s clear that, though in their first year, they’re fully in gear and running an intensive school. But what is an Interfaith minister anyway? Someone in a uniform who’ll make you feel uncomfortable?

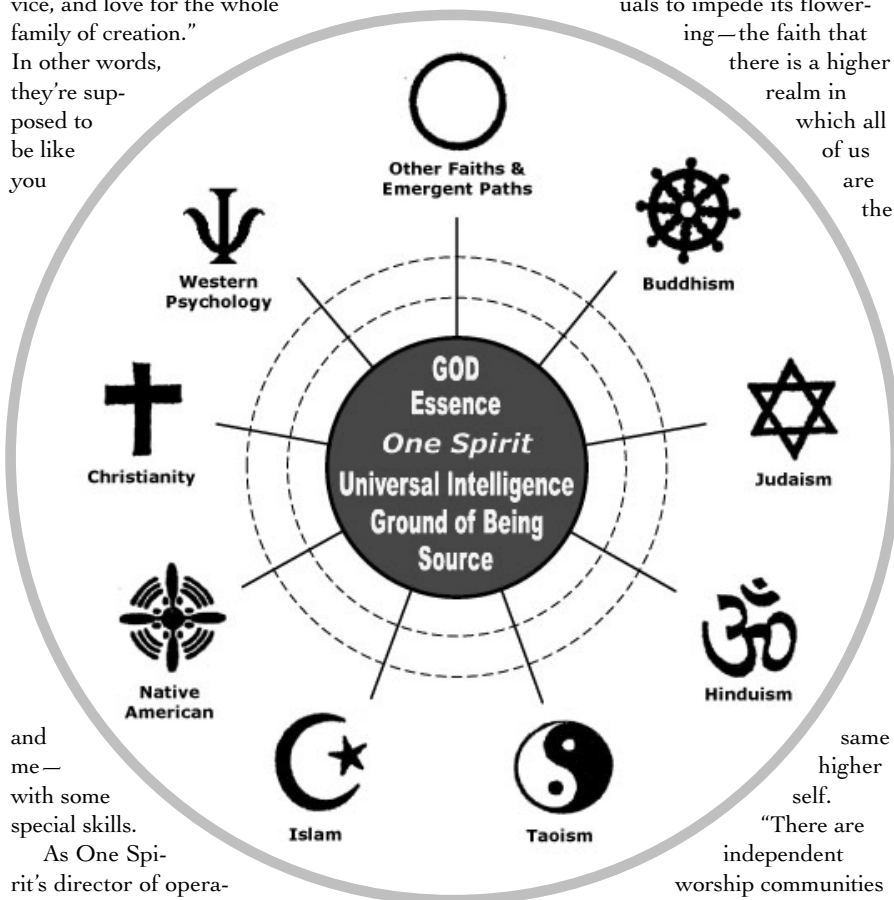
Certified seminary graduates are expected to enter a life of “spiritual service with solid training in world religions, ceremonies and services, basic counseling, and other prescribed duties of ordained clergy”; at the same time, “committed to the values of peace, tolerance, compassionate service, and love for the whole family of creation.”

In other words, they’re supposed to be like you

Such ministers would seem especially appropriate to *chaplaincy*—work with the sick, the suffering, the imprisoned—and *hospice*—work with the dying. Both are included in the Interfaith curriculum.

The value of such service, as Rev. Diane points out, accrues also to the minister. “It certainly stretches us beyond the comfort zones of our ego, and facilitates the dissolving of the boundaries between the self and the other. I think that’s one of the primary functions it serves in spiritual development.” There is no tradition or heavy-handed institution to get between the Interfaith minister and those who are served. If anything, there is a mutual faith that may be strengthened from having no hidebound rules and rituals to impede its flowering—the faith that

there is a higher realm in which all of us are the



and me—with some special skills.

As One Spirit’s director of operations, Rev. Joan Block, remarked in the course of a relaxed interview, kicked back in her workday jeans, “If I’m asked by Buddhists to preside at a ceremony—a marriage, a funeral, whatever—I’ll wear my black Zen robes. If it’s a Christian ceremony, I have an angelic white robe that’s better suited for the occasion.” Reverend Joan has an alternate name as well—*Kiun Shido*—since she’s also an ordained Zen Buddhist nun.

The point here seems to be *service*—doing chameleonlike religious duty to supply what’s needed to make a transcendent event happen, whatever the faith involved—if any. Perhaps the largest community of people welcoming the services of Interfaith ministers is that of the unaffiliated, and even the disaffected. People who have withdrawn for whatever reason from the strictures of longer-standing traditions, yet who still need spiritual sustenance in their lives, may well feel more comfortable with the ministers who stand outside of those traditions, yet remain adaptable to all of them—“guerrilla ministers,” as Michael Pergola, president of the board of trustees, calls them; “representatives from another consciousness, living the everyday reality.”

same higher self. “There are independent worship communities

springing up around the country,” she says, “organized around this perspective of *all-inclusivity*. I think it has the potential to become a faith movement.”

An emerging One Spirit program open to the public is the One Song Interfaith Retreat Center, which recently held a weekend retreat called “Prayer for Peace.” The role of prayer in six different spiritual paths was explored, and participants included an Islamic Sufi imam; a Jewish rabbinical student; a Hindu yogi as well as a United Church of Christ yogi; a Native American yogini; and a Tibetan Buddhist nun. Each taught his or her own particular method of prayer to the assembly, and the event culminated in “a two-hour continuous rolling prayer,” according to Rev. Joan.

“And then we offered prayers to each other, to our community, to the world, to the universe—for peace—and then extended it out to the largest sense of community that we could possibly envision—and even on into the infinite, for those of us who are inclined that way.”

With so many so inclined, who have managed to keep or renew their faith, there may yet be hope for us all.

—William Meyers