**Sermon at the Unitarian Congregation of Taos**

**July 20, 2014**

**Rev. Hollis Walker, ``The Interfaith Idea: Crafting a Personal Spirituality’’**

Good morning. Thank you for inviting me to speak to you again today.

Hafiz was a 14th-century Sufi mystic Hafiz who had a lot to say about God and religion. Hafiz was nothing if not direct. He said:

*The great religions are the ships,*

*Poets the life boats.*

*Every sane person I know has jumped overboard.* [Repeat.]

I know that among you today are probably many who would agree with Hafiz, and I do, too. I’ll take a good poet over any religion, any day. And yet. . . .

Beyond the narrow confines of individual religions is something called, variably, interfaith or interreligion or interspirituality. For right now, let’s call it ``interfaith.’’

What is the interfaith idea?

The idea of interfaith dialogue, talks among people of different beliefs toward a common goal—has been around for millennia. The first major organized meeting of global religious leaders was the Council for a Parliament of the World’s Religions, held in Chicago in 1893. At that meeting Swami Vivekananda introduced Vedanta, that is, Hindu philosophy, to the West. Imagine: it was the first time most Western theologians had ever heard the concepts of any Eastern religion.

The swami discussed the theoretical possibility of a “universal religion,’’ ``a religion which will have no place for persecution or intolerance in its polity, which will recognize a divinity in every man or woman, and whose whole scope, whose whole force, will be centered in aiding humanity to realize its divine nature,’’ he said. It was the first attempt at articulating what might occur if people could see beyond the constraints of their own faith traditions.

One hundred years later, in 1993, the second such Council for a Parliament of the World’s Religions was held, also in Chicago. Some 8,000 world religious leaders attended. That council issued a statement of Global Ethics that reads, ``As religious and spiritual persons we base our lives on an Ultimate Reality, and draw spiritual power and hope therefrom, in trust, in prayer or meditation, in word or silence. We have a special responsibility for the welfare of all humanity and care for the planet Earth. We do not consider ourselves better than other women and men, but we trust that the ancient wisdom of our religions can point the way for the future.’’ More progress toward the idea of interfaith.

There have been subsequent meetings of this group in various cities around the world, and will be another in 2017.

In our times and our country, the concept of interfaith has blossomed in the past few decades. Since the 1960s Jews, Christians, Hindus, Muslims, Bahá’ís, people of all faiths and people of no faith, have marched together for Civil Rights, for women’s rights, for gay rights— and *against* the Vietnam War, poverty, the death penalty, and later, the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, the excesses of Wall Street and now, against the deportation of immigrant refugee children. Today we take for granted that we will see, at any major protest, people of the cloth and their congregations united—regardless of religious differences. We also take for granted that collectively, religious people will support humanitarian and charitable causes. For example, in Santa Fe it was the Interfaith Leadership Alliance, made up of clergy of all faiths, that started a homeless shelter that has put an end to deaths from exposure in the winter in Santa Fe. The congregations represented by the ILA support the Interfaith Shelter through financial donations and service, including the preparation of meals to the homeless and hungry.

But the idea of interfaith has evolved significantly beyond the scope of older definitions. Even the word “interfaith” is used differently today, not just to refer to cooperation among religions but also as a philosophy unto itself. When I am using this term, it includes those who are members of a particular religion and those who are “SBNRs,’’ as we call them, the “Spiritual But Not Religious’’ folk —*and* those who would not define themselves as religious or spiritual at all.

Since the early 1990s the ``interfaith’’ idea has taken on meaning as a philosophy more necessary than ever to our survival—especially since the events of Sept. 11. There are those among us, as we know, who would condemn all of Islam because those who perpetrated the events of Sept. 11 were Muslim. Yes. And those who carried out the Crusades were Christians. And those who are at war in the Middle East now are Jews and Muslims. Father Thomas Bonacci, founder of the Interfaith Peace Project, says that, ``Interfaith spirituality is no longer reserved for a few esoteric types but is rapidly becoming our hope for the future of the world and humanity.’’ [[1]](#endnote-1)

Perhaps the greatest ambassador for interfaith in our time is the His Holiness the Dalai Lama, the political and spiritual leader of Tibetans and Tibetan Buddhism. In his 2010 book, *Toward a True Kinship of Faiths*, he notes that, ``To accept that other religions are legitimate may seem to compromise the integrity of one’s own faith, since it entails the admission of different but efficacious spiritual paths. . . .Yet without the emergence of a genuine spirit of religious pluralism, there is no hope for the development of harmony based on true interreligious understanding.’’ Toward that end, he says that, ``for me Buddhism is the best, but this does not mean that Buddhism is the best for all. . . .It [also]means that I, as a Buddhist, must not feel egocentric attachment to my own faith of Buddhism, for doing so obstructs me from seeing the value of other traditions.’’ [[2]](#endnote-2) Likewise, UUs who think themselves to be intellectually above religious belief might consider that attitude perhaps represents an egocentric attachment quite similar to the one His Holiness references.

Clearly, he tells us, we need not leave behind our own beliefs, whatever they are, to embrace the interfaith idea. We simply need to open our minds and hearts to others. Many people who wouldn’t think of leaving their own faiths behind are now committed to working as interfaith ministers, chaplains and lay volunteers. I attended an interfaith seminary—of which there are now about a dozen in the United States. Among my fellow students at The Chaplaincy Institute in Berkeley, California, were an Eastern Orthodox Christian, a Tibetan Buddhist, several Zen Buddhists, numerous Roman Catholics, a woman who considered the 12 steps her religion, pagans, Wiccans, Native American religious practitioners, an Episcopal or two, a Jewish cantor, a Muslim, various and sundry Protestants, and three Unitarian Universalists. Most of these people planned to go out into the world—practicing their own faiths in their personal lives—but serving as interfaith ministers in their work. We see ourselves not as not missionaries for our individual faiths, but as missionaries for Love.

Today, some of my former seminary classmates serve the homeless, one works at San Quentin prison, many are chaplains in hospices and hospitals, still others serve in street ministries, corporations or traditional congregations. In my own work as a clinical chaplain, I have served Jews, Muslims, Hindus, many nonreligious people, many SBNRs and Christians ranging from Mormons to Jehovah’s Witnesses to born-again fundamentalists, nondenominational Christians, Roman Catholics, Methodists, Lutherans, Native Americans, etc. Interfaith ministers like myself also often serve the religiously unaffiliated (the “unchurched,” as we call them) through ritual and ceremony, as celebrants for weddings, funerals, baby and home blessings, and at deaths. We also offer spiritual direction and counseling to individuals and groups, as many of us are trained to do. How do we do that, when we have our own beliefs? We believe we are there to serve and support the human being, whatever their beliefs or religion or lack thereof.

It should be clear by now that this evolving idea of interfaith that I’m describing is bigger than tolerance of other religions. It is of broader scope than finding commonalities among religions. And it certainly does not suggest that all religions and deities are at their cores the same, nor does it recommend assimilation or merging of religions. Swami Vivenkenanda’s idealistic notion of a “universal religion” is not on the interfaith agenda.

I realize that for many of you, the idea of being tolerant and even interested in other religions is old hat. Many UU congregations are host to a variety of religious groups within their own sanctuaries; my former UU home, the Unitarian Universalist Church of Berkeley, had groups of congregants who met separately as Buddhists, pagans and humanists, with an occasional seder thrown in for good measure. Some people went to *all* of the groups!

But I would suggest there may be a subtle difference in philosophy between interfaith and UU, one that I can best parse by describing what an interfaith practitioner does. An interfaith practitioner doesn’t just *tolerate* other religions, isn’t just *curious* about other religions, but *embraces* all religions—as well as agnosticism and atheism, humanism and secularism and secular humanism and any other –ism out there. All are valid belief systems that have something from which she can learn. She actively pursues interactions with people of many beliefs in order to expand her understanding and feed her own spirituality. The interfaith practitioner may take training in and adapt the spiritual or mystical practices of other religions for her own use. Interfaith as I know it tends to privilege direct experience over doctrine, to focus on interpersonal connections, and to emphasize spirituality, contemplation and mysticism.

Rev. Jürgen Schwing—one of my mentors in seminary—notes that many interfaith ministers and practitioners like himself are people who have had experiences or glimpses of a mystical reality, ``a state of consciousness of total unification of all opposites in a love and light so awe-inspiring, peaceful, and ecstatic, they can’t even find adequate words for it.’’ Such people may ``lose patience with the artificial divisions between religions, with each religion’s claim to exclusiveness [or] superiority, and with each religion’s attempts to force cohesion among its believers by demanding adherence to a set of dogmas or principles of faith.’’ [[3]](#endnote-3) Thus through mystical experience another interfaith practitioner is born, jumps overboard in search of a poet and a lifeboat.

So, is there such a thing as an “interfaith spirituality”? If so, where does one get it?

Naysayers usually assert that the interfaith or interspiritual person only skates across the surface of a faith, by cherry-picking beliefs and practices suited to her (and, the implication is, avoiding anything uncomfortable or difficult). They claim that out of context, the beliefs and practices of any religion are stripped of meaning.

But the people I know who take the idea of interfaith seriously have a deep and abiding interest in finding and developing their own spirituality. And they are anything but superficial in their quests. Personal suffering may indeed play a role in their search for meaning and the divine.

My friend and fellow seminarian Matt Sanders, a hospital chaplain, is a Roman Catholic. When I asked him about the role of interfaith spirituality in his life, he said, ``Interfaith spirituality helps me to keep a balance, even while being Cristocentric.’’ Matt says that for him, interfaith spirituality is ``about finding the Holy, the Sacred, in many different traditions. Interfaith spirituality has meant to look for the stories, the teachings, lived examples and ideas that promote things that bring humanization, such as: freedom, love, a sense that `all is well’ (or at least a sense that `all shall be well’).’’ Matt says, ``In 12-Step work I often hear, `Take what you like and leave the rest.’ Well, for me,’’ he says, ``interfaith spirituality has meant to do something [ . . . ] similar with religion, namely, to be enriched by the stuff that helps, and to set aside the religious teachings that promote negativity such as suspicion, prejudice, etc.’’ [[4]](#endnote-4)

Another interfaith minister, my friend and spirituial companion Rev. Pandora Canton, grew up in the New Apostolic Christian Church, a fundamental sect. As an adult she became a Religious Science member and certified practitioner—about as far afield from New Apostolicism as you can get! Later she worked for several Lutheran congregations as a chaplain at four of the worst-ranked nursing homes in Oakland and Alameda, California. Rev. Canton writes, ``If we move 360 degrees around [Michelangelo’s] David, we see many different perspectives; each is valid and beautiful. Interfaith spirituality is like that to me.’’ Each tradition brings a different perspective, casts a new light on God. Rev. Canton says what’s most important to her is not the sign on the door of the church, but being a part of a welcoming community and finding within it what it is she needs to learn. Today she works as a hospital chaplain in Ashland, Oregon. She says of her evolving spiritual practice, ``[It] could be Buddhism next.’’ Rev. Canton’s personal spiritual activities include prayer, meditation, singing, rituals, reading sacred writings, and the work of spiritual discernment with her friends. [[5]](#endnote-5)

Another spiritual companion of mine, Lindsay Ralphs, is a retired hospice nurse and therapist who is now a volunteer hospital chaplain and nurse to the homeless. Lindsay is an interfaith practitioner of the Episcopal-Jewish-Buddhist ilk. Raised Mormon, she attends an Episcopal church because she is attracted to the ritual and the structure. She is also involved in a Jewish Renewal synagogue, where she attends services, chanting meditations and holidays. ``I like the heart and soul (and dancing and singing) of it,’’ she says. ``I also really like the [Jewish] approach that one is to argue with god. Buddhism is tossed in there as a really big overview. I need both the unknowable and the really tangible.’’ Lindsay’s spiritual practices include meditation, bird-watching, prayer and reading. She recently decided she should have a silent retreat at home alone and found that instead of having a meaningful spiritual experience, she was miserable. So, she gave up on what she called later ``the deprivation thing.’’ Instead, she said, ``I walked around, I drew, I did some meditation but not much, I bird-watched. But mostly, I was doing things that felt connected to me. I was being `present’ to my life. And it felt very sacred. And really very fun. [[6]](#endnote-6)

It wouldn’t be right to stand up here and talk about interfaith spirituality without talking about my own. I was raised a mostly-Methodist-but-sort-of-generic Protestant of the military family variety, but left my Christianity behind in college when I decided Jesus just couldn’t be the only Son of God. Many years later, my emphasis in seminary was on Judaism, in particular the mystical Kabbalistic tradition, and I feel more at home theologically in a synagogue than in a sanctuary. I have also studied Buddhism informally for a long time, and I am a devotee of the Swiss psychiatrist and mystic Carl Jung. In my daily practice, I read sacred literature, journal, pray and meditate; I run, I spend time in nature, I drum, I make artwork. I burn incense like a Hindu, sage my house like a Pueblo Indian, chant in Hebrew like a Jew. In my home are altars with icons of the Virgin Mary, the goddess, Kuan Yin, the Buddha, Ganesha, the Hindu musical saint Saraswati, and a plethora of ancient Egyptian deities. Like my spiritual companions, Matt, Pandora and Lindsay, I learned the deep truth of the interfaith idea from my work as a chaplain in hospitals, hospices and homeless shelters. No one has Christian cancer. No one has Hindu heart trouble. No one has atheist arthritis. When we are sick, when we are dying, when we are at our most vulnerable, doctrine and dogma fall away; we are all merely human, and in need of sacred listening and acceptance.

I visited the Hopi Reservation recently and my Hopi friend Gary told me some things I had never understood about his people before. He said that the Hopi religion is actually a hybrid, made up of the many religions of the different native peoples who migrated to the same place long ago and now make up the Hopi. Thus every Hopi clan or family group has its own religion, with its own myth, its own kiva rituals, its own requirements, its own prayers, its own dances. Because of these many obligations, the Hopi religious calendar is a busy one year-round. And every clan is expected to participate in every other clan’s ceremonies. So, he said, ``It's as if you spend December being a Muslim, and all December you do everything the Muslim way and according to the Muslim beliefs, building up to a big ceremony or celebration of some kind. Then there might be a break, a few weeks off, and then you become a Catholic, and you do everything the Catholic way for a period of time. Then a few months later you are a Buddhist. . . .’’ And so on.

One life ritual of the Hopi culture, he also explained, is that when you are a young person on the verge of puberty, you are adopted by a godparent and you become a part of their kiva. Though you remain a member of your own clan, you learn your godparent’s religion, and practice it your whole life. Also, you cannot marry into your own clan; you must marry outside of your clan, for obvious reasons. If you’ve followed me here, you’ve figured it out by now: Every Hopi is cross-trained, so to speak, into everyone else's religion.

This seems to me to be an almost ideal interfaith model. Because—the net result? Every single person on Hopi is connected to every other person in some way. Despite their disparate roots in the past, their differences in the present, all Hopi are Hopi, a collective, a tribe. Shouldn’t we all be?

So how does you become an interfaith practitioner, craft an interfaith spiritual practice, if you want to? Ask a friend of a different religion or denomination than you to take you to their religious meeting. . . .Is there a particular church or faith group that really scares you? Perhaps a fundamentalist Christian group? Get another curious friend to go with you to services. Look for the beauty in these traditions, find something you can identify with. Meet the people, the religious leader. Take what you like and leave the rest behind.

Likewise, expand your own idea of what constitutes “spirituality.’’ For those of you who do not have a religious belief, just focus on the power of love, the creative power of evolution in the universe, the power that makes transformation possible in our lives, the ultimate mystery within which we all must live. . . .Those last phrases come from the UU pamphlet on God available in the hall outside the sanctuary. Look at your own life as a spiritual path. Ask yourself, what did I do today, what ordinary thing did I do today, that was in fact spiritually powerful for me?

Try some new spiritual practices borrowed from other religions. Take a class, read a book, or just make up your own version of it. Don’t worry about doing it ``right.’’ Create your own mantra, a phrase or group of words that are meaningful to you, in the language of a foreign faith. Do anything that makes you feel more connected to something important—yourself, other people, God, Love. Do it with sincerity, and you will benefit. Some of us believe that if enough of us do these things, the world will change for the better. We will not care so much about the color of God’s hat, but instead see only her beauty!

In closing, I would like to leave you with some more words from our Sufi friend Hafiz:

Hafiz says:

I have learned so much from God

That I can no longer call myself

A Christian, a Hindu, a Muslim, a Buddhist, a Jew.

The Truth has shared so much of itself with me

That I can no longer call myself a man, a woman, an angel,

Or even pure soul.

Love has befriended Hafiz so completely

It has turned to ash and freed me of every concept and image

My mind has ever known.

Amen. Shalom. Salaam Walaikum. May it be so. Thank you.

1. Bonacci, Thomas, ``The Interfaith Complex: A Clarification of Terms,’’ 2009, p. 1 [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Gyatso, Tenzin, the Fourteenth Dalai Lama, ``The Challenge of Other Religions,’’ Shambala Sun, September 2010, pp. 17—18, adapted from *Toward a True Kinship of Faiths: How the World’s Religions Can Come Together* (Harmony, 2010) [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Schwing, Jurgen, ``Fanning the Mystic Fire: Reflections on Interfaith Spirituality,’’ an ``Expanded Version of Reflections Presented at Ordination Service for the Chaplaincy Institute for Arts and Interfaith ministries, Sunday, May 5, 2002, Fairfax Community Church,’’ Fairfax, California, p. 3 [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Sanders, Matt, personal email in response to author’s query, Dec. 18, 2013 [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. Canton, Pandora, personal email in response to author’s query, Dec. 18, 2013 [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. Ralphs, Lindsay, personal email in response to author’s query, Jan. 3, 2014

**Supplement: God’s Hat**

I adapted this from a poem written by a banjo-playing man named Mike Gregory. My thanks to Rev. Gail for finding this for me. It’s called

**What color is God’s hat?**

This story comes from Northern New Mexico, a long, long time ago.

it’s about two farmers in their fields, each with chile to hoe.

One day God went walking down the road between

Wearing one of her many hats, the one that’s blue and green.

The blue side—it was pointed East. The green side pointed West.

And anyone who saw one side, just couldn’t see the rest!

So one man saw the green side, and one man saw the blue,

Looking at God’s beautiful hat, from different points of view.

God went on a’strolling, enjoying the morning breeze,

Until she passed beyond their view, behind some piñon trees.

Then God began to walk straight back, the opposite way through town,

But just before she did that, she turned her hat around!

So the man who saw the green side, and the man who saw the blue,

Saw the same side as before, when God was walking through.

And both men, having seen the God, dropped their hoes on the ground,

And went a-running rapidly, to tell the news in town.

The one man said, *``I’ve seen our God, and as the proof of that,*

*I can tell you honestly, she wears a bright green hat!’’*

The other man cried, *``You heretic! What are you lying for?*

*God’s hat is a lovely navy blue! I saw that hat she wore.’’*

From having different viewpoints, each man knew HE was right.

And that’s the basic reason they had a nasty fight.

They were screaming, punching, kicking—and rolling in the mud!

The villagers were scared that soon they’d both be spilling blood.

But just before some bones got broken, to everyone’s surprise

God walked into the Plaza and said, *``Excuse me. Guys?’’*

No one in the village had ever expected THAT,

and lo, behold, upon God’s head, she wore that very same hat.

Then God explained She didn’t care, if those two men fought.

Because God, she’s way above such things, but she left them with this thought:

*``While you men are busy fighting, there’s farming that’s not done,*

*and there’s no chance to do a dance, and songs aren’t getting sung.*

*No children get their teaching, no artworks get produced*

*And while the shepherds watch you fight, the sheep are running loose!*

*What’s more, I’m going to mention, since God is what I be,*

*The number of the hats I wear can reach infinity.*

*So fight on if you feel you must, but let me warn you that*

*I think you’ve better things to do than argue about my hat!’’* [↑](#endnote-ref-6)