

November 12, 2008

**BY CATHLEEN FALSANI Religion Columnist**

"Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God."

-- *Jesus, according to the Gospel of St. Matthew*

"If you want peace, work for justice."

-- *H.L. Mencken and/or Pope Paul VI (depending on whom you ask)*

The setting was perfect for the task at hand -- the pristine, alpine grounds of the Aspen Institute, freshly dusted with a coating of snow, in the offseason quiet of Aspen, Colo.

More than 150 religious leaders from diverse traditions -- monastic Christian, Sufi Muslim, Buddhist, Hindu, Jewish, Native American and others -- gathered last week in the Colorado ski town to try to figure out how best to speak with one voice on the issue of peace (and justice), and how to encourage President-elect Barack Obama to make compassionate decisions in his new administration.

It's at once a simple and ambitious task. Often in an interfaith (as it's commonly called) crowd such as this, finding common ground -- or even a common vocabulary -- can be a challenge in and of itself. But that wasn't a hurdle at the Global Peace Initiative of Women's "Gathering Spiritual Voices of America," where I was invited both to observe and participate in setting an agenda for compassionate, contemplative social action.

There was a remarkable level of cohesion among the august cohort of religious leaders assembled in Aspen, that included the Rev. Thomas Keating, a Catholic monk and founder of the Centering Prayer movement; Joan Brown Campbell, former head of the National Council of Churches; Rabbi Zalman Schachter-Salomi, founder of the Jewish Renewal movement; Kenneth Frost, spiritual leader of the Ute Nation; Swami Atmarupananda, the senior monastic at the Ramakrishna Mission; the Venerable Bhikkhu Bodhi, chairman of the American Buddhist Association; Lama Surya Das, Sister Joan Chittister, and the president of Naropa University in Boulder (the first Buddhist-based institute of higher education in the nation.)

The conference was purposely scheduled to begin just two days after the presidential election, and the first slice of common ground that was blatantly evident was an unfettered elation at Obama's election. Most participants spoke lovingly of Obama -- with a sort of spiritual reverence -- the man upon whom they've rested immense hope for the rebirth (spiritually and otherwise) of the nation and the ushering in of a more peaceable, healthy world.

"The national soul is now asserting and coming forward and choosing to serve humanity," said Sraddhalu Ranade, an educator and scientist from the Sri Aurobindo Ashram in India.

" 'Blessing' Obama took the mantle, stood to his feet, and said, 'Yes,' " said the Rev. Cynthia Bourgeault, founding director of the Aspen Wisdom School, calling the president-elect by the English translation of his Arabic first name. "We get a sense of what a human being is when we stand up and become one of the responsible ones. And it was beautiful. But he can't stand up alone."

Obama's election was, for many of the leaders present, an indication not only of a shift in political power, but of spiritual power as well. Among the issues the leaders agreed were most pressing -- the economy, the environment, the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, global poverty -- as the president-elect looks toward setting his agenda for the all-important first 100 days of his administration, was helping the nation heal from what many said was eight years of fear-mongering.

Some called Obama a prophet. Others spoke of him almost as a savior. But as the conference wore on, cooler heads prevailed. "This transformation is not about Barack Obama, it's about us," Brown Campbell said on the last day of the five-day conference. "We make heroes of people too quickly and . . . rest the responsibility on his shoulders [alone]. He's always said 'us.' Every time it's pointed to him he's said, 'No. It's all of us.' "

A Chicago industrialist named Walter Paepcke founded the Aspen Institute, which hosted the peace conference, in the 1950s to be a place where "the human spirit can flourish." He ended up transforming the tiny mining town into a haven for artists, thinkers and leaders from all over the world. Paepcke, reportedly inspired by the Great Books program at the University of Chicago, began the intellectual endeavor that eventually became the Aspen Institute in 1949, by hosting an international celebration for the 200th birthday of the German poet Johann Wolfgang van Goethe.

"He is happiest, be he king or peasant, who finds peace in his home," Goethe said.

While the conference ended without a final document outlining agenda points and spiritual marching orders for the new president-elect -- leaders are crafting a letter for Obama and hope to deliver it to him in the New Year -- it concluded on a note of profound unity.

The assembled ministers, imams, swamis, yogis, rabbis, healers, and just plain faithful, prayed together many times during the conference. For Obama. For President Bush. For, as one woman put it, "the karmic knot to be untied."

On Sunday afternoon, before they scattered to the four winds, the spiritual leaders held hands in three concentric circles for a Sufi zikr -- a prayer ritual. They chanted praise to God, asked for blessings of peace, and concluded by singing the Christian hymn "Amazing Grace" over and over again while dancing a simple side step.

"I once was lost, but now am found," they sang, "was blind but now I see."

It was both a prayer and a declaration of faith.

And it was also a hope, that we all -- including our elected leaders -- might work for peace and act with compassion and grace.