

Gathering Spiritual Voices of America
To Deepen Our Knowing of Oneness and Our Compassion as a Nation

A National Reflection with America's Religious and Spiritual Leaders
November 6-9, 2008 – The Aspen Institute, Aspen, Colorado
A Program of the Global Peace Initiative of Women

“May our coming together be the beginning of a coalition for a new consciousness, arising from the heart of the nation, based on a vision of oneness and the awakening of compassion”

SUMMARY REPORT



AIMS, PARTICIPANTS, AND PROGRAM

Gathering Spiritual Voices of America drew together approximately 130 spiritual thinkers and visionaries, and thought leaders, plus around 80 interested members of the local community, for a four-day reflection on how to deepen our knowing of oneness and our compassion as a nation, and how to focus collective spiritual wisdom in a way that can guide the development of a new consciousness and a new way of living, one in harmony with our planet's resources and needs, and in harmony with our fellow human beings.

The gathering, held in Aspen, Colorado at the home of The Aspen Institute, sought to generate spiritual energy, commitment and courage. Structured as a reflection, the program alternated between times of dialogue and times of silence, meditation, sacred song and prayer.

This inter-spiritual reflection was unique in that it was the first such gathering conceived and led by women, with the participants a mix of women and men. We tried to identify and bring together those working from a united spiritual vision, who have moved beyond advocating for any one religion as the sole path. As well, we tried to identify those steeped in contemplative wisdom, whose knowledge emerges from a deep interior life.

Throughout the meeting, we aimed to align the group with the highest positive forces so that together we can prepare to take more constructive steps toward transforming the various forms of violence – conflict, poverty, neglect, exclusion, and environmental degradation – that threaten our nation and world today. It was hoped that a spiritual vision would emerge, with a statement of principles and priorities designed specifically for our nation at this moment in time, which could be widely distributed as an inspiration and guide.

Through the gathering, we aimed to create together a vast spiritual reservoir from which new vision and inspiration can emerge to guide people in communities across the country; we can help move the consciousness of the country; and through this work, we can come together and address the pressing issues at hand. We saw the Aspen gathering as a think tank and a beginning for a new coalition for contemplative action.

THE CONTEMPLATIVE PRESENCE

Throughout the gathering, the contemplative presence was evoked by spiritual practices interwoven in the program and embedded in the participants. The times of silence, prayer, meditation, chanting and other practices helped anchor the work of the group, provide opportunities for reflection, and still the racing mental bodies seeking answers to the national and world problems that drew us together. A Shabbat service, an evening of prayer, chanting and meditation, mornings of Sun ceremony, yoga, qigong, meditation and prayer, and silent pauses throughout the day brought inner wisdom to the outer work, which came to a close on Sunday, Nov. 9th with a moving inter-religious Zikh.

One of the most beautiful forms of the contemplative presence was that created by the continuous prayer of members of the Rifa'i Marufi Sufi order. In the small meditation room at the foot of the stairs, one could watch the spinning human prayer wheels of the Sufi dancers, who held their vigil while the participants worked in voice and reflection in the meetings.

The gathering was blessed, strengthened, and lifted by the continuum of meditative energy devoted to the wellbeing of our nation and created by the intentional invocation of the contemplative presence.

QUESTIONS AND THEMES

“The significant problems we have cannot be solved at the same level of thinking with which we created them.”

Albert Einstein

The first day and a half was a closed reflection with the core group of spiritual leaders on how we feel called to respond to the multiple challenges we face as a nation, and as a world community.

The Call to Action asked, “What is the significance of this time and what are we being called to do or be?” Delegates were then asked to contemplate and discuss critical questions about the inner and outer life that would help to guide the discussions over the four days, and to keep in mind the need to raise the level of thinking as suggested in the Einstein quote above.

Questions offered about the inner life focused around: (1) communication of the process and value of inner work, (2) issues within inner work, and (3) working together and inclusively. Questions proposed about the outer life centered around: (1) language and education, especially finding a common language that allows us to connect, (2) applying spirituality, making it attractive and the norm, and (3) political and social action, especially bringing shared spiritual values to bear on political and social life.

As the Aspen gathering began two days after the 2008 Presidential election was resolved in the choice of Barack Obama, the hope and excitement of this outcome pervaded the meeting, and much attention was given to how the work of the gathering could support the President-elect and the future of the nation.

SUBTLE ACTIVISM AND SPIRITUAL ACTIVISM

“We have to come together across spiritual lines, because that is where the great mystical energy lies. There is a type of activism that arises out of contemplation. Anything else is social action.”

Sister Joan Chittister

The reflective circle on subtle activism and spiritual activism spent time in meditation as well as discussion. Intuition is less a function of the discursive mind, and more a process of embracing a vibrational level. It is possible to get things done via an inner way; we could trust groups to focus energy as a way to shift the consciousness of the country and the president. There is a “being energy” that is so powerful. It’s about transmission, not just about communication. “Being has a magnetic contagious effect. Let’s truly realize the power of our consciousness and realize from that deeper place. . .deeper and wiser action.”

The circle also discussed the fact of those who have a gift to work with subtle energies, the possible dangers in doing such work and the need to be careful and vigilant there. Those who feel called to do such work will find ways to work together. It was pointed out that a lot of conflict in the material world is a result of conflict on subtle levels, and that work in the subtle realms is important to be doing now.

SPIRITUAL ACTIVISM – MOVING FROM THE INNER TO THE OUTER FIELD

“How do we build a coalition for a new consciousness that can have a guiding voice and presence in our nation’s public life? We are being called to a sacred form of activism. How do we respond to this call?”
(Aspen Gathering Program Booklet)

Education, critical thinking, input to the media from spiritual leaders, and attention to young people were key responses in this reflective circle. For example, we could deepen our spiritual activism by strengthening how we work in the religious press, and can write material to counterbalance the simplistic, polarising views often found in media outlets.

Working for spirituality in citizenship was suggested, and to find a group with momentum is a good strategy. Newly enfranchised youth are such a group, one that spiritual and religious leaders can inspire and support. Engaging young people in projects such as curriculum design and helping them practice critical thinking can lead to young people taking initiative and demonstrating leadership.

The group noted the need to provide alternatives to what is going on, to protest or stop what is harmful, to work by changing from within, to watch out for “us vs. them” perspectives, and to ask, what are the structures supporting divisive actions and how can we change them from within. Using non-religious tools and language can help people relate to positive change. It is important to find ways to show that spirituality is a tangible, relevant, living experience. The environment was referred to as a path to transforming consciousness and reaching young people in particular. Problems of poverty in all its forms, hunger, war, violence against women, and racism need to be included in the efforts of spiritual activism.

A focus on values rather than religion was suggested – values of service, justice, charity. The group was also reminded of the effective strategy used by Gandhi of small, highly visible, single issue campaigns.

The need to search for underlying or root problems was raised, such as the low level of human consciousness at this time. Religious traditions have teachings about raising consciousness – these need to reach a broader public.

BUILDING A COLLECTIVE CONTEMPLATIVE VOICE FOR THE NATION & REFLECTIONS TO THIS POINT

“Changes are already happening here, the group is making a change. . .and I hope that people all over the world can get together like this.”
An Indigenous Grandmother

Here we were reminded that human beings are complex and that as well as speaking to the mind, we must also acknowledge and support that part of us which worries about safety, feelings, movement and that part where intuition connects, where revelations are received. Deep listening and connecting to a deeper source within yourself in order to access creative responses are skills that can be learned. The need for moral courage was raised, and for this, the need to develop the higher faculties of the mind. We can engage in contemplative collaboration to work to change the consciousness of the nation.

Spiritual intelligence is already unfolding in young people – we can find ways to support this and also protect them from their vulnerability. Moral courage requires a moral model – one that could be communicated via “viral technology”. We need to work with the problem of time starvation; one way is through reconnection with nature. Contemplative groups where people live can help make spiritual connections in communities. Education can help young people recognize a spiritual dimension in their lives – there are “gateways to the soul” (Kessler, *The Soul of Education*). We need strategy married with grace, to develop a strategy for making an impact, while leaving room for grace. A person with grace is a person who radiates the hidden wisdom that she or he is open to receiving. To change, we must die to what we are, and keep dying – work on each point when you get there. Grace is God’s strategy – the dying cracks open your heart so you are ready for what is in your strategy.

There was general agreement that a new form of spiritual activism is now required – that crosses all traditions and focuses on that which is unifying in the religious traditions. It was also agreed that we need to communicate more effectively and broadly the concept of oneness as the fundamental principle of life. Communication is the main challenge facing the various contemplative spiritual communities, which are essentially of one mind but have not come together in any unified fashion. A new contemplative coalition would have to find ways to bring these communities together and find the language and means to communicate effectively to the American public.

OPENING OF THE PUBLIC FORUM & DISCUSSION OF THE EMERGING AGENDA

After a day and a half of reflection with a core group of spiritual leaders, the forum was opened to an invited public, most of whom were practitioners of some contemplative practice or active in one of the main thematic areas.

The public forum began with a Native American Spirit Song – then the calling of the Divine Mother, global heart prayers and prayers for leadership. Dena Merriam spoke of the need to strengthen the feminine energy as a way of healing and shifting the global dynamic to create greater balance in the world. She spoke of how this would impact all of the challenges we face – climate change, poverty, conflict, etc. Mark Gerzon, co-facilitator of the gathering, spoke of his work in the masculine dominated world of diplomacy and government, dealing with the question of how to bring in the deep feminine and meet it with the deep masculine, how to rebalance the feminine and masculine. He hoped that this group could be a bridge between the two worlds – the world of “to be” and the world of “to move forward.”

Father Thomas Keating suggested to the group that while the contemplative voice has usually been reserved for the solitude of the disciplined traditions, the monasteries, the hermitages, the lamaseries, this group gathered in Aspen, is suggesting that the contemplative dimension of life is everyone’s possibility. The transformative dimension of life is inherent in all – but usually reserved for some, and the cost of this has been a missing voice. Life is more than we are experiencing now, yet the culture does not understand this. There is a movement of deep selves that has an energy difficult to articulate but still manifesting. A great openness comes via the contemplative possibility of prayer. Still, we must approach “how” with caution, as voices full of negativity have great power. There is a transformative power of Oneness, and everything participates in Oneness, but in a different way. Diversity, Father Keating continued, if not based in unity is divisive; diversity when based in unity is enriching. We can experience the mystery of the presence of the Creator in our individuality, and we hold hands as a sign of our aspiration to deeper unity.

When those who had newly joined the group were invited to offer questions, and the recurring keyword of their questions was “how”: how and what to take to the halls of power, how can we most effectively contribute to opening the human heart, how to take this out there, how can our project support the larger work, how can we be a bridge, how to carry the compassion to those who are hurting.

Mark Gurzon asked the group to think about what they might feel on Sunday at the closing of the gathering, what would make them feel excited then, and how that might happen. He suggested to the group that those who wished to do so could submit project ideas, and that these ideas could be collected into a booklet. The criteria offered for these proposals were that (1) each would honor the spiritual/political nature of this gathering; (2) each would move to another level, as suggested by the quote from Einstein being used to guide the work; (3) each would involve cross/trans/multi-faith perspectives; and (4) each would be submitted by at least two people. The proposal booklet was later distributed to share ideas and foster a network.

Kenny Frost, Elder of the Ute Nation, noted that it is not often that we are on a pinnacle of change, and that he looked forward to all of us being positive change agents for good, and to all people being treated equally. Native American people must be included now. We are here to make that positive jump into the future, he said, where we can pull everyone in, regardless of color, nationality, or ethnicity. Kenny encouraged the group to be positive and to spend some time in Nature and ask for the wisdom of our relatives to flow into our hearts, and to ask for this wisdom to come into our human council.

Rev. Cynthia Bourgeault reminded the group that while those who supported Obama will be experiencing hope, those who supported McCain may be experiencing anxiety. We should breathe in the pain of others and work collectively to reduce fear. Spiritual elders know how to do this, and we should commit to work as healers on the pain body of this planet.

Imam Mohamed Bashar Arafat explained that what drove him to come to this gathering was hope – hope that Americans are sick and tired of fear. What has been defeated in this election is extremism; what is lasting is love and reaching out.

Ven. Bhikku Bodhi offered the view that the US is at a critical point which is forcing a paradigm shift, and noted four main problems facing the nation: (1) a two-fold war, and a lack of sympathy in the US about any deaths other than US deaths during these wars; (2) the internal war on terror which is stripping citizens of their constitutional rights; (3) a widening gulf between the wealthy and the poor, with more of the middle class falling into poverty and the poor becoming more impoverished; and (4) the destruction of the natural environment. The internal problems of the human mind that create these problems are fear, an “us-them” discrimination, greed, and craving for power, and it is these qualities that we must remove from ourselves.

The contemplative sees the world as God sees it, according to Sister Joan Chittister. The problems we face are created by a cultural context based in these issues: a theology of superiority -- a sense of Christian superiority to universalism; a theology of success, where affluence is seen as a sign of God’s blessing; and a theology of separation, which leads to racism. We live in a time when science has become our new spiritual director. We have a moral responsibility to deal with all of these issues, and we need to stop relinquishing to government our personal morality.

Brother Achalananda observed that we are in the midst of a change from one world age to another. We must be aware of the need to change with the changing time. The two problems of fear and greed

bounce off each other. We must change the basic qualities of humanity ourselves – it is we who must change. We cannot look for change outside ourselves so we don't have to struggle. We have to change from the basics. We the people are the world and all of us must change. We have realized that we are tremendously incomplete and need to change. Especially we need to work on fear, and we need to become less arrogant, more thoughtful of others, and open the heart.

Rev. Cynthia Bourgeault spoke of the mystical image of Adam, the idea that one human being contains our reality, that we are all cells in one living body. That is what was felt on election day, the sense of one body. Three distinct vocations, she said, are found within contemplatives: (1) the path of prophecy – to stir souls; (2) the path of intuition, energy, work of will – visualisation healers; and (3) the state of deep surrender. There is a technology, knowledge, resources about work in the spiritual realm that can be learned, and we need to teach these.

CREATING A COMPASSIONATE AND UNIFYING SPIRITUAL AGENDA FOR THE NATION

“The deep contemplative life is essential to action, and it will sustain us.”

Sister Joan Chittister

To begin, six voices were invited to offer feedback on the process and where we are now, and small groups that had not yet reported were invited to offer their input. Speakers noted that:

- there is a sense of divinity that transcends gender;
- we can both flow and focus at the same time, that is, we can have clarity and fruit – outcomes, products – as well as creativity;
- it scares people when we promote peace and the removal of stress and fear from the standpoint of religion and spirituality, so we could promote peace via health promotion, wellness;
- the Divine Mother is also the goddess of silence;
- consciousness must rise, and at the tipping point we will realize that “we are the people we’ve been waiting for”;
- we need to be willing to acknowledge to our co-workers the importance of the inner work – this is not New Age work, not flaky work, it is really helpful work; and,
- we need to focus on gratitude.

The discussion then focused on the task in this context: Basing our vision on the principles of interconnection, oneness and compassion, can we reframe timeless values in a new context – to address the pressing issues of economic disparity, environmental degradation and the environment of fear that has hold of the nation? Brief introductions were then given to the four circles to follow:

Orland Bishop spoke on economic disparity and poverty. It is the human being's perception that makes the world as it is. We must overcome the boundaries of self-interest. Poverty occurs when we don't communicate on a level where we enable understanding. Money is an agreement between people to manifest something between them, to co-create a reality that they want to live in. Not to participate is a new poverty. It is poverty to work within a framework where I have to compete to be myself. How do we liberate ourselves from this framework and these agreements?

John Milton addressed the issue of the environment, beginning by raising the need to be a voice for all species. One of the greatest slaveries today is the slavery imposed on all other species by human beings. Other species don't have much voice. We must learn how to come into communion with the

rest of life, which we can do by spending time in the embrace of the great Mother, Nature. A way to bring the rest of life into the circle? Take the church outdoors. Spend time each day just resting in your senses – incredible gifts.

Anna Douglas spoke to the group about overcoming fear. The heart is a channel of knowing; the hara, the belly, a source of great intelligence. Go deeper into the body and its wisdom. Fear is the delusional nightmare of the separate self and does not represent our deeper nature. Our task is to see it more clearly. Fear is very believable. We can un-create fear – it is a mind state. To be fearless in the midst of difficult situations is to be a peacemaker. Evoke fearlessness.

Sensei Eugene Imai spoke of bringing balance internally and externally, describing “Kanon’s Way”, a way of thinking and action centered around balance and timing. Whereas many ideas are presented as polar opposites, for example, young-old, new-old, love-hate, we can view these as embracing and complementing each other rather than opposing. We need both to be whole. Balance can be found through gratitude for what we don’t have as well as what we have, for what we love as well as what we hate.

BRINGING COMPASSION TO OUR ECONOMY: TOWARD AN INCLUSIVE ECONOMICS

“We must build a spirituality of ‘enoughness.’”

Sister Joan Chittister

“The word ‘mercy’ has the same Latin root as the words ‘commerce’ and ‘mercantile’, a root which means exchange. The face of God is made known through exchange. Whatever increases exchange increases the presence of God.”

Rev. Cynthia Bourgeault

Rev. Cynthia Bourgeault pointed out that Michael Brown has said that “giving is receiving” is the energetic frequency to which this planet is aligned. All other approaches to energy exchange result in imbalance and disharmony in our cosmos and personal life. We belong to a realm of interconnected manifestations. Divine Love is becoming known through exchange. Compassion, forbearance, generosity, peace, and forgiveness – these are names of God.

Orland Bishop offered the view that the Constitution sets up a democracy not about winning but about “how do I have to be in order to allow you to be free?” It strives to create an economy of love for the future. The deep Earth holds a type of ecology that allows us to imagine and create an economy of compassion with care for each other’s future. This is not a cash economy. Such an economy would resonate with the capacity to be a creator and with the fact that human beings act with meaning and love. With regard to the next administration, Orland pointed out that we cannot ask the President to carry our collective shadow when we haven’t done the required work. So many people have invested all their resources into a system that doesn’t allow them to be who they are. We have to create a new economy out of the soul forces of people (a view expressed by Martin Luther King). The compassionate task before us is not politics as usual. Poverty is not an economic problem.

Later recapping the group’s discussion for the larger group, these points were made:

- if we can give more than we take, then we create wealth
- we need to participate in structures to move toward greater justice
- as givers we empower money to act for us

- we need to consider what are the agreements that will allow us to renegotiate connections to the economy so that a compassionate economy will arise.

CULTIVATING A COMPASSIONATE RELATIONSHIP WITH EARTH

So much of the public discourse around climate change is ultimately about economics. Most discussions on sustainability do not address our relationship with the Earth and its community of life – our need to come again into an intimate relationship with the Earth, as the older cultures knew. Our understanding of interdependence and oneness should help shape a new vision of how to interact with our environment in a way that will value the long-term wellbeing of our ecosystems. Awareness of environmental issues is rapidly growing – how can we build this into a national priority?

The summary from this group included the following points:

- to hear from our Indigenous Grandmothers was a great blessing
- concern about water and its commercialization around the world
- concern about “Monsanto-ization” of seed
- the need for global action for every tradition – training the next generation to restore Mother Earth
- trying to find ways to return to care for the Earth – through green jobs, restoration techniques, healthy food, stopping drilling and pollution, conserving, living simply, holding a simple livelihood.

TAPPING INNER POWER TO OVERCOME FEAR AND ANGER

This circle dealt with the relationship between inner and outer battles, particularly with overcoming fear. Among the comments were these ideas: through softening the heart one can stop the cycle of fear within; giving love and compassion and expressing gratitude can help with lessening fear; ignorance and a profound sense of not knowing who we are causes fear; coming to know that we are not these bodies helps relieve fear; we can examine what our fears have to teach us; fear is “false evidence appearing real”; and subtle energies are at work with fear and darkness.

CULTIVATING A UNITIVE, GLOBAL CONSCIOUSNESS

The session began with prayers offering our collective love and compassion to the people of China and to Tibet in the hope that their karmic knot may be untied.

In this session we sought to develop a deeper understanding of the intuitive sense of Oneness underlying life. When enough people come into this consciousness, the vibrational or energetic level of our world will change and we will find the inner resources and know-how to solve the challenges we face.

Barbara Sargent explained the understanding offered by alchemy, described as the science of Oneness. Alchemy holds that there is a single divine substance that enters into all forms and expresses itself through the characteristics of that form. This substance that unites all is a divine beingness. The purpose of our lives and of our planet, according to this point of view, is to transform the matter of who we are into the soul of who we are, thus turning lead into gold, and we are all, slow or fast, transforming our bodies into more radiant expressions of love. At this moment in American life we are also given the opportunity to participate in the transformation of lead into gold as a nation – there’s an opening for us to rise up spiritually and for what’s higher to come down to meet us. But this depends on each of us doing our own inner work, our own purifying. The more true we are and the more we engage deeply with our spiritual practice, the more it enlivens and enlightens everybody on the globe.

The conversation continued with an in-depth explanation by Sraddhalu Ranade of the nature of unity and oneness. “There is oneness at each of these levels: physical energy, life force and mind. . . yet these three are so distinct in their quality, properties, and principles of existence that you cannot even harmonise intellect with your emotions. The drive of your life force is so different from the purposefulness of the mental substance and mental realm, you cannot harmonise the two unless one is forced to subjugate to the other.

The secret of unity therefore is not to be found in these three, although all three are universal principles. There is something else of which mind is an expression, life force is an expression, material energy is an expression – we call that the spiritual.

The intention of the spirit is to manifest in an infinite richness of multiplicity. Although the source is one, the oneness is not a bareness of unity. Both unity and multiplicity are its terms – it transcends both. But the oneness chooses to manifest in a multiplicity of possibilities of all potential – it is indescribable wonder. The only relationship that is true with all this is love, a oneness that meets across difference and embraces that difference in its identity – that is love. So the future of humanity is an infinity of religions, paths to find the Divine. One religion for each one. And it is towards this that the whole movement of reconciliation, of different viewpoints of humanity, different experiences, philosophies and religions, is leading us to realize.

Regarding evolution of the individual and the collective, we find strong parallels with the human individual evolution; just as in our individuality we must distinguish between the ego self and the true one individual eternal self, so, too, the national consciousness must distinguish between the national ego and the national soul – it is the confusion of this that creates the international strife we see. Perhaps what this present change of the last few days represents in the American consciousness is the collective will to choose the national soul instead of the national ego. It is the national soul of the USA that is now asserting and coming forward and choosing to serve humanity. As in the individual yogic process of conscious change, there is a struggle, it won’t be easy. . . . Each one of us can participate in this process by ourselves consciously attuning to our own deepest and highest truth and bringing that in our individual and collective life.”

Rev. Cynthia Bourgeault explained that the heart is the instrument that sees oneness and expresses it. Contemplatives in each of the traditions have ancient wisdom and practices for awakening the heart, the organ of sight. Because of this, contemplatives have an important role to play, of remembering the vision, of using that wonderful interconnectedness and the oneness to transfer energy around.

Rabbi Zalman reminded us of the story of Prometheus: “He thought that he had to steal the fire – all he had to do was ask the gods. We are being given the fire, being deployed. . . .” Another voice advised us

to remember the perfection that is already here. “Creation means diversity, and not everyone shares our vision. There is perfection at the heart of things. See this – it will help bring about transformation.”

Rev. Joan Brown Campbell closed the session, observing, “this moment in history has been given to us and no other. This transformation is not about Obama, it’s about us. We make heroes of people too quickly and rest on their shoulders the responsibility for this time in history. One thing that has moved me about Obama is that he has always said ‘us’ – every time it pointed to him, he said, no, it’s all of us together. Oneness is really about us. We live in a culture in which criticism comes fast – we have to remember that when we stood, we stood together. When we pray, remember we pray for ourselves as well as him.”

AMERICA’S LEADERSHIP AND THE INTERNATIONAL COMMUNITY:
REFLECTIONS FROM INTERNATIONAL DELEGATES

“Hope has never trickled down, it’s always sprung up.”

Studs Terkel

A perspective of America from abroad was given to the group via contributions from international participants. Delegates travelled from Afghanistan, Australia, China, India and Sudan to take part in the Aspen Gathering.

What came across in the open and honest portraits of countries where there is much suffering was the perceived responsibility of America for both the cause of the suffering and also for its remedies. The delegate from Afghanistan spoke movingly of the suffering of women and children in particular. “Millions of people have been killed. Poverty is all over Afghanistan. The rights of women have been abused, they have been stopped from education, stopped from communicating with each other. Torture occurs. Each day I say, God help me to make it through the day. That is real life in Afghanistan. I have been working in education and health – both related to poverty, related to war. I train teachers – children have been traumatised. [Women are] so weak, so tired, so exhausted. Through this training, we try to sustain the life of women and children, try to teach them peace. We have lost wisdom, trust, justice – it is so unjust right now in my country. Through this education, with the help of God, I try to bring this to women and children. The issue in this is leadership in America – what Obama will do in my country. Afghanistan is devastated. People don’t have housing – they live in containers, tents. The government, the UN are not ready to provide for them. Do they look for American leadership? Yes. What do they look for is not the American way – not to compete for material things. We want jobs, simple jobs, a job that we can do for ourselves. We want people to be able to have value, to live in justice. We don’t want our people to be materialistic. Millions of dollars have been poured into Afghanistan, and that money didn’t do anything. Afghani people are really looking. . . . The army didn’t help us. We need wisdom, this kind of gathering in Afghanistan. God bless all of you.”

The delegate from China spoke of many positive things about her country, while acknowledging many challenges. She spoke of elders who gave their lives to the service of others, of family members who say, “I don’t care about power, I don’t care about money, I just want to serve my people.” Unfortunately, though, there are famines and abuses of power. Everyone gets hurt, but despite the suffering, it is necessary to move on. She suggested that spiritual people need to be more proactive. She described experimental projects to help poor farmers. “My political theory is harmony”, she explained. “Think global, that’s the Chinese style, but act local. We want a bit of time. . . . What will change the fact [of suffering] in China is that I can help. . . . I think we can resolve a lot by ‘think global, act local’.

I as a Chinese don't have a right to tell Afghanistan what to do. I don't know Afghanistan ... I know China. . . .”

The delegate from the Darfur region of Sudan spoke with gratitude about the opportunity given to him by GPIW to go outside Darfur to leadership programs and to this gathering. He did not describe the situation of suffering in his region to the group because it is too upsetting. “Right now we are here and we are talking about spirituality and the new world that we would like to see. Unless you work with us young people, young leaders – to know what exactly is the bottom line – all that we dream of will not exist unless you work with us. How are we going to take such to the young people? Spirituality, which is not something one can read from books or from university – we just work hard in order to get high grades, we are not getting the real meaning – this has to come from the home.”

He then spoke of the concern that in America, being a Muslim is thought to be a terrorist. “I think everyone has a right to believe whatever they like. This view has been used to justify American policy all over the world. There are so many issues about fundamentalists and the extremists – we're not denying that – they're as dangerous to us as to you. The media – they just focus on the extremists.”

“I want to share my happiness and my pleasure that I came to America at this period of time to witness the great change that you are expecting to get. The Sudanese are very happy that Obama is the next president. We are also waiting for a change, and we have been waiting for a change for a long time. ... Work opportunities are needed, as is something like this for us, to end the war, stop killing people. America has the opportunity to give this to our people. It is not up to us to decide our fate. It is beyond our ability to do. They are the ones who could bring us people or destroy our people. America is not just for Americans, America is for the world. I think now we have the right guy, what he needs is support from you, he needs honest people.”

The delegate from India spoke of the changes she sees in the world as a result of a greater understanding of consciousness within the scientific community. We talk about a new spirituality – new spirituality springs from the work we have done in matter. It is not perhaps what we have known in past traditions. . . a springboard which has catapulted in other dimensions. The greatest passion and ... in detail and working out – has been done in America via the new physics and biology. [What we have learned is that] there are no parts and no aggregates – that is a scientific discovery out of a lab. That is the most significant out of our times. Discovered in matter. All our new technology is that the wholeness of energy is present in the parts – it's not the parts that become an aggregate. So that you have a whole – pragmatic and real it is. We live by it and we use it every day. It shows that the entire physical universe... functions like a web – you touch it at one point and the whole vibrates, and happily even spiritual. Is there a point in our consciousness which is holistic? [To] truly create a different pattern of living and consciousness. . . what do we have to do? To me this is the threshold of evolution. The whole humanity is together, it's not a work that can be done alone. If there are ancient civilisations that have done this, then we should explore them. We're not going to solve our problems of life unless we arrive at another quality of consciousness, another way of handling matter. The problems created by one level of consciousness cannot be resolved until you rise to another level of consciousness, unless we can see things differently.”

Rev. Joan Brown Campbell summarized the international viewpoint, noting that “if this is the time for change, let it be for the whole world. People are saying, we want you to listen to us. See if there isn't some new kind of foreign policy. . . .”

The meeting then opened to questions and comments from other participants. Much discussion focused on trust, changing the language of mistrust, and risking to open ourselves to trust other nations. Father Thomas Keating remarked that “we are on the eve of humanicide, that is to say, the destruction of all civilisation by mass means. So we desperately need to take every opportunity to dialogue and to trust in the basic goodness in people. We’ve been talking about the oneness that is supposed to be there, and it is there, and it can be awakened by kindness, dialogue and trust.”

Sharing great ideas and things that work across international boundaries was another theme. We were reminded of teaching as a responsibility of religious and spiritual leaders. Models of women and men working together were offered, and speakers noted the benefit of participating in international gatherings to address important issues like poverty in all its forms. It was suggested that mentoring the protectors in a society so that they will not hurt the innocent can lead to being able in the long run to get rid of weapons and ending political abuse. Another pointed out that we must work with the feminine within, and give ourselves as a world body to service. The session closed with a story exemplifying the rising sense in the US of positively investing in the future through the new administration.

THE FINAL DAY: MOVING TOWARDS CLOSURE

“What’s important is not what’s happening in the White House, it’s what’s happening in my house and your house.”

Gail Thomas

At the beginning of the final sessions it was announced that one outcome of the gathering could be the establishment of a Council of American Contemplative Elders, and the possibility was raised of gatherings similar to this one being held in regions around the country. The idea of inter-spiritual “contemplative cells” was offered. Some form of contemplative consortium is needed – “post-denominational timeless wisdom is an endangered natural resource in our world.”

Contemplative education is needed to prepare the spiritual elders of the future. We need to work to bring out the best in everyone. We should strive not to be consumers but producers, virtual lighthouses as well as physical ones. We need to see the Divine Light in everyone and every moment. We all sink or swim together. Within diversity there is also the divine.

A certain uneasiness was expressed about contemplation and action. When the world’s on fire, we need to act, but when we run to act, sometimes we get lost – so we need contemplation along with a passion for action.

One spoke of transcendence and the need to be strategic with grace. We were asked by a swami to remember that the pure contemplatives are acting to transform the world, and to keep the mind balanced when acting. Consider what quality of intention we bring to this action, what motive, whether we can stay unattached to the outcome.

Several times throughout the gathering, having a meeting place on the web was suggested to continue this work. The group then adjourned to the final reflection circles.

THE DIVINE FEMININE – FEMININE PRINCIPLES AS A HEALING AND TRANSFORMATIVE POWER

“Wisdom is in pursuit of us.”

Thomas Coburn

This session set out to address the transformative energies and processes that can help the world community balance material with spiritual development, overcome the narrow, limiting forces of self interest, and support the unifying forces seeking to burst through the collective unconscious. The Divine Feminine, appearing in all religious traditions and known in the East as Shakti, has this transformative function, tapping regenerative healing powers.

Experiences of the Divine Mother were described as they manifest through many traditions. The Mother brings balance to the contemplative world. There are both peaceful and fierce aspects of the Divine Feminine – for example, Green Tara tames our unruly natures that are wild with ego. The ego must be burned away.

A DIALOGUE ON RELIGION AND THE MEDIA

The initial focus of the conversation in this circle centered on the Presidential election and on President-elect Obama. Columnist Cathleen Falsani commented that Obama has elevated the conversation about religion, drawing as he does upon a wide multi-faith background. She then spoke about the role of “covert Evangelicals” in the election results. She said she was seeing changes in young people who are Evangelical – they wear t-shirts about poverty and have “God is green” stickers – and they supported Obama. She quoted a Sufi saying that “if the people will lead, eventually the leaders will follow.”

She then offered the group some ideas about how to translate information from a meeting such as this one into good stories for the media. She suggested focusing on the particular, and identified ideas she would make into stories from the gathering: the two Irish participants, one now part of the Self-Realization Fellowship, the other part of the Brahma Kumaris; the Native American women from the International Council of the 13 Indigenous Grandmothers; the parallels with Australia; the Imam and his relationship with the State Department; the hope agenda – contemplation and action; “strategic grace”; the history of women’s peace work; compassionate liberalism; and spiritual elders who have known each other for a long time.

Steve Waldman spoke of the role of religious progressives in the election. He talked about the “God gap” being greater than religion – and that it is probably a church attendance gap more than a difference in particular religious views. The priority of economics in this election helped win over religious voters. Obama, he said, was clear on the role of faith in democratic life, and he got Democrats to be open to people of faith.

David Schimke spoke about working with the media, beginning with “know who your audience is” and find common ground with them. Prepare yourself to talk to the media – know who you are talking to and find common ground with them. Concede points to get to a higher place. Also, step up and support the media who you think are doing a good job. Our job as citizens is to support good media. The religious right has highjacked the religious conversation in the middle, making it almost a form of “infotainment”. David explained that his goal as a journalist is to create empathy. We should be celebrating and directing people to good journalism. Use the tools of the internet to do this, tell your stories on the blogosphere.

Nancy Roof, Editor-in-Chief of Kosmos Journal, described the recent election as a global election important to the movement for global consciousness. We use information in the media to make our policies and decisions in life; therefore, we must get the media that we need.

The group was told about Search for Common Ground, and the project of having Hutu and Tutsi journalists writing together to produce a radio program. Unity consciousness ideally will go beyond polarisation. We can look for the common interests and needs and find what is the common humanity here. Look for new language.

The question was asked, how does the media look at an interfaith gathering such as this one? The response was to take slices and not bother with the labels. Tell personal stories, for example, what does it mean to search for peace as an entrepreneur? Get a Facebook group for GPIW, the group was urged – and one was created online on the spot.

There is no such thing as “the media”. We have the ability to contribute to the media ourselves. The media thrives on conflict, because that’s what they think readers want. The negativity factor, though, went too far in this election.

How do we get names to media people? Send a short email to someone you hear that you like on radio, tv or in newspapers. It’s also free to do a little internet radio site from your home. Remember the power of story – show, don’t tell.

We need to look at ways we can amplify and leverage our impact. It was suggested that as good articles are found, to pass them around the network. Remember the power of the local newspaper as well – write a column. The media is ours and it’s about the public and you have to hold it accountable. The media is also in flux and in crisis. On beliefnet.com, the most trafficked area of the site is “inspiration” – a really well told inspiring story will speak to a lot of people. Pray for the media – it’s a tough time for journalists and they are fearful. They are trying to tell stories that make a difference. Quality matters. There is an explosion of information – go within and reflect to see what is really needed.

HEARING MORE VOICES

“I love you, my brother, but there’s an assignment for the girls.”

Rev. Annette Hood

The group reconvened to hear more voices. Rev. Annette Hood asked where is the Christian African American voice, then spoke of her inspiration to share: “tell them God uses women”.

In response to the question, who is running the show, Sister Joan Chittister responded, noting that GPIW are convenors, catalysts. We cannot make your ideas happen, but we can invite you to move your hearts into this movement. We’ve invited you to be GPIW wherever you are. Let us convene you on the internet. Move beyond the corporate model to a model of people moving together. Time changes nothing, people do.

Several young people were invited to offer their thoughts about what had touched them most about the gathering, and what requests they might have for the elders gathered here. Rev. Emery Berry told the group that he had gained new understanding of others and their practices, and had found great value in the honest dialogue at mealtimes. He found renewed commitment to meditation and prayer. He had found that interfaith dialogue was more relevant and more fun. He found growing compassion toward ecological issues. Some needs he saw were for more African American presenters, greater discussion of topics and more opposing ideas. He could have used some working definitions in the beginning, and he thought it would be good to step outside of our middle class mindset. He suggested some training workshops in interfaith work.

Meaghan Sutton, a graduate student, then spoke to the group about why young adults may feel uncomfortable in such settings – to feel the presence of wisdom can be intimidating, to think about how we want to change the world is also difficult. She wanted to have dialogue about the faiths without worrying about stepping on toes. She said that it was wonderful to experience openness here, that the

gathering was truly an inspiration. She would like to find ways to stay connected and to have an equal exchange.

NEXT STEPS

Dena Merriam began the process of ending the gathering, saying that there is no closure. GPIW is a small network, we donate our time and have wonderful partners and supporters in this work. We don't stop making commitments. We continue our international work – in Afghanistan, Cambodia, Palestine-Israel, and have a continuing commitment to Sudan. But we also now feel a commitment to continue what was started here at this Summit in the US.

A Council of American Contemplative Elders can be formed to guide work in America and globally, joining contemplative wisdom with compassionate action. We will take the work to different parts of the country, to places of need, to deepen and awaken contemplation.

This gathering has been more than we could imagine. We were gathering the voices so that something could emerge. We seek to honor contemplation and activism, and will form a Contemplative Coalition dedicated to transformative activism. This will be a welcoming circle, make everyone welcome. The hallmark of Oneness is the diversity that is honored in its Oneness. We must know Oneness while not forgetting its diverse expressions.

The Council of American Contemplative Elders will communicate with the President-elect, Pray for President Bush as well as the new President and for all leaders. Remember there is action in inaction, and inaction in action.

CLOSING INTER-SPIRITUAL ZIKR CEREMONY

Kabir and Camille Helminski and members of the Spiritual Paths Institute led the group in the closing inter-spiritual Zikr ceremony. We were directed to the meaning of 'baraka', which means blessing, the charge of spiritual endowment, holiness, spiritual power, that comes into human life. In the Zikr, remembrance is the intention, is the greatest good. Presence refers to a state of self-awareness. In remembrance, our presence opens to an ocean of presence – this is remembrance from the heart, where we enter into primordial Oneness.

We chanted to life, to the Divine Presence, to the truth that there is no Divinity but the Divinity. In concentric circles we danced, singing the underlying chorus of invocation and praise while the greater songs of wisdom teachings soared overhead, connecting the chanting of the Koran with the lilt of Amazing Grace, hands held between faiths of all kinds, a ceremony of the gathering of spiritual voices of America. In deep gratitude and awareness of the work ahead, the Aspen Gathering closed.

It was agreed that we would follow the Summit with time – weeks or months – for reflection on what and how to act next and then be in touch again after the New Year on building a Contemplative Coalition for the nation.

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