

# The Contemplative Alliance & GPIW



On October 22, 2011 the Contemplative Alliance gathered at the Living History Farms in Urbandale, Iowa to connect with the contemplative, inter-faith, and spiritual networks of the Des Moines metro area.

"A Call to Inner Reflection for Societal Transformation" was the first of many smaller listening circles around the nation being organized by the Contemplative Alliance under the guidance of the Global Peace Initiative of Women. This gathering brought together individuals whose aim is to explore the collective spiritual resources available to help heal the country at this time.

The meeting comprised members of the Contemplative Alliance steering committee as well as representatives from the Bahá'í Community of Des Moines, Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Ames in Iowa, Des Moines Meditation & Mindfulness Group, Consortium for Contemplative Leadership, Iowa Powered Yoga, and Raise Your Game coaching in Iowa. The bucolic surroundings of the Living History Farms provided an environment for deep listening and exchange between the 30 participants.



## **The Contemplative Landscape in Iowa**

The morning's discussion focused on what is happening in Iowa regarding spiritual activism and consciousness transformation. The main response was that spiritual/contemplative communities and faith networks in Iowa support and emphasize changing from within without a particular doctrine in mind. One participant talked about AMOS - A Mid-Iowa Organization Strategy supporting community initiatives for working-class and poor - as an example of Iowans bridging spirituality with social justice and community transformation. Groups like the International Crossroad Community at the University of Iowa - active in protecting farmers against loan sharks and industrializing hog lots - was another instance of "non-spiritual" groups doing good and aligned with spiritual and contemplative values.

With these examples in mind, the group discussed the intersection between spiritual awareness and community service. They examined the idea that social justice and contemplative pursuits are essentially rooted in the same principle: human values. A representative from the Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Ames shared that the record for volunteerism in Iowa is 3rd or 4th in the nation, which in many ways mirrors the spiritual and religious roots found throughout the state. Supporting this notion, a representative from the Bahá'í Community of Des Moines said, "There's a grassroots activism here emblematic of the American spirit."

All agreed that the driving force behind the contemplative movement - in Iowa and around the nation- is the belief in restoring community values. Many in the group support movements that help to localize economies, give credit to individual purposefulness, and protect the local environment. The challenge, however, was envisioning how this community ideal could be revived and replicated at a national level.

The founder of Iowa Powered Yoga said that spreading the contemplative message widely is about hearing and listening to the other. He explained that his family is characteristic of the diversity of opinions represented throughout the country, yet he sees the core message of kindness and equity held within each family member, despite their differing points of view.

**"If we can hear their message, speak to that.  
Just listening allows the conversation to go deeper with the other.  
Be interested, not interesting."**

## **Defining Contemplative Values**

As a growing national network, the Contemplative Alliance members shared that they mobilize to address human concerns through spiritual awareness; their mission is not to promote one faith tradition or practice over another. The continued morning's reflections covered how contemplative values can restore integrity to economic and

environmental systems currently out of balance.

Many in the group agreed that the word spirituality has become a replacement for the word religion. There has been a hijacking of the religious conversation and spiritual message. One participant said, "If we're talking about "values" the list is longer than just abortion and gay marriage."

They also addressed a seeming divide between the inner (spiritual) and outer (activism) contemplative work. The group agreed that contemplatives use inner spiritual practices as a guiding force to address societal imbalance. Raising a counterpoint, a representative from the Consortium for Contemplative Leadership in Des Moines said, "Contemplative communities are closest to bridging the concepts of non-ego values and acknowledgement of higher power, but not all community values are positioned to function in this way."

### **A Contemplative's Role in Society: Healing the Economy**

Growing unrest over economic disparities nationwide also played a central role in the discussion. The group agreed that interpretation of democratic and economic freedoms is not merely a right to pursue personal and financial happiness at the expense of the environment, and wellbeing of the global community.

Addressing the external and macro-paradigm shifts, the founder of Raise Your Game coaching in Akeny, Iowa shared that big companies and agro business are aware of the environmental and economic changes at play, and they too are trying to adjust, but they do so from a bottom line perspective, such as raising premiums or creating hybrid technology.

The group talked at length about the implications of corporate influence on localization efforts, particularly as it relates to Midwestern farming. In Iowa, a movement toward mostly industrialized agriculture has largely wiped out family farms - though some remain. Large scale farming has decreased top soil quality throughout the Midwest because of mono-crop cultivation, which is mostly influenced by business interests. In Midwestern states there's an attempt to go organic, but many farmers are pressured by the corporate industry to produce on a scale prohibitive to more natural farming. Alternative energy was also cited as detrimental to the existence of the small scale farmer, as wind and ethanol production is heavily subsidized, making large scale crops more enticing.

The endangered small farmer has suffered in Iowa and other Midwestern states. For example, food desserts are now a phenomenon of farm country, not just urban areas. A representative from Bahá'í Community of Des Moines said that the lack of small farms causes many families in rural Iowa to have to travel to the next county for fresh produce, which is unaffordable for many if you don't have access to resources and ample time.

The discussion circled back to what needs to happen to get these issues greater national attention. GPIW founder proposed there needs to be reframing and re-classification for people who care about these challenges. She said, "Currently we're considered 'tree-hugger,' which has a negative connotation. The situation is so dire to the extent that you have to ask why mothers and grandmothers are not standing up for their children and grandchildren. Where is the conversation of LOVE: love for the environment and love for humanity?"

*This comment prompted many thoughtful responses from the group:*

The founder of the Des Moines Meditation & Mindfulness Group said, "We have to understand deeply what is meant by love. Love means love for everything and everyone, unconditional value and respect for the other's presence, even if that person does not serve the planet and humanity with good intentions. Love is another way of saying UNITY, not being separate from each other; we are the other."

A representative from the SHIFT Network addressed love as the expression of interconnection from a tangible point of view. He said, "Around the world there's a collaborative and synergistic energy building around contemplative mindset. Our network is one effort to help these individuals and movements coalesce. By looking across the continuum of the contemplative framework, it's a social enterprise to amplify the efforts of different sectors of society by acknowledging each one of us has a different calling. Shift acknowledges not just the luminaries."

A Swami from the Ramakrishna Mission in California said, "If you don't feel connected to others, why would you want to work for the welfare of others? Feeling interconnectedness is a principle of LOVE. Current economic policy is focused on immediate gains. Changing the current system isn't enough. The mindset also has to change, so contemplation becomes relevant to help re-shape how we think and feel. Reacting to systems is also not enough; we need to be deeper, more comprehensive in our thoughts. The collective ego of the country says we have to protect "my" money and interests, but if you look into soul of the country it is based on the foundation of principles of generosity."

The founder of the Reciprocity shared how the expression of love is manifest in his work with youth and rooted in the Occupy Movement. "Working with youth over the years, I have seen how they are unable to transform their dreams into a sustainable way of life - [because] their dreams are spiritual in nature. Currently there are 43,000 youth homeless in NYC. Now occupy Wall Street has been a way for them to address their legitimate concerns and deeper feelings and aspirations that are rooted in spirituality. This is not a political movement. The fact that they do not have 'leaders' in the traditional sense does not mean they are confused and doesn't mean there aren't any. In fact, it is emblematic of the societal ideal which they feel is needed to help birth a sustainable way of living, in which they can enact their dreams and make a soulful contribution. They say they are all leaders and see the wisdom and creativity of all involved. They are thinking more collectively, not individualist. Mentorship is based on giving and receiving - for the first time in their lives they feel connected to something that is motivated by the principles of LOVE."

To conclude the afternoon session, a member of the Contemplative Alliance steering committee led a reflective exercise with 6 teams of 5. He asked each small group to consider the following question:

The current mindset says we need a "recovery" of economy, but if it were framed as "healing" the economy how would the outcomes be different? Please consider how do I, or can I heal the economy?

### **How to create unity through a contemplative spiritual movement**

To conclude, the group explored next steps for broadening the network of the Contemplative Alliance. Some shared that the Alliance's website should focus on methodologies for consciousness sharing - as another way of the direct experience of being together as opposed to gatherings, as there is a need to support virtual relationships in the contemplative community. Some thought to integrate children in the Alliance effort through the education and the support of parents.

Others agreed it is extremely important not to lose the spiritual and faith based aspect of the Contemplative Alliance, as this is the binding force that brought the group together, and what makes it unique.

And finally, many stressed deemphasizing outcomes - what they should be or look like. The group posed the question: "How do you come together as a united spiritual movement without being attached to the outcome?" They agreed, collectively, that the answer was to focus on next steps based on what's in your heart. Many shared that the Contemplative Alliance is a transitional movement with ebbs and flows. Thus, a focus on the process and the practice of contemplative living, not the outcomes, is most essential at this stage. Bringing tools for transformation is the role of Contemplative Alliance - the magic is in the power of sharing. In order to do this a unifying language and message needs to be formed.

A Contemplative Alliance member from the Sri Aurobindo community based in Georgia, USA led the group in an OM Choir exercise to close out the session with greater spiritual unity.

About the OM Choir:

“The OM Choir was formed to bring down a New Music [by reciting the phrase “OM”] from the highest heights, bringing with it a transformative power. Descending into a collective human body power it enters in the very cells and then into the earth. It is a universal force of harmony and beauty and a music of peace and healing.

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Visit the Contemplative Alliance - <http://www.gpiw.org/contemplativealliance.html>

