

**Not One – Not Two:  
Global Spirituality from an Interfaith Perspective**

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Recently I was asked by Patty Speier, the Executive Director of Seton Cove, to participate as part of a series of presentations addressing “Global Spirituality from an Interfaith Perspective.” You can imagine that this was a daunting prospect. I wondered how I could possibly approach such a broad and important topic and, at the same time, limit my comments to fit into an hour-long luncheon? Of course, this is, in part, why there were several speakers in the series, each with their own perspective and experience in interfaith dialogue. Nonetheless, it was still my task to address the question in a way that would have some meaning to a diverse audience.

I report all of this because I began to realize that my little personal struggle was actually an example of the larger question we all face. How do we even begin to open and facilitate a peaceful interfaith dialogue so that we can invite real healing in a diverse and wounded world? If we remain narrowly bound by our own individual perspective or only use a model of spirituality circumscribed by our personal faith tradition, we lose the global perspective. We have plenty of examples of this strategy and its disastrous results in religious inspired wars throughout history. If we step back far enough to get a larger and more inclusive view, we risk losing the complexity and diversity of the many traditions, cultures, and practices we find today. Unfortunately, this is the trap into which some interfaith initiatives often fall. In an attempt to bridge the gaps and acknowledge similarities, we can erode the richness of diversity and discount the real and important differences that are instructive. Simply acting nice to each other doesn't confront the real difficulties or invite actual possibilities.

I began to get a sense that there might be one core issue at the center of this question that seemed to go beyond any particular faith tradition, cultural perspective, or political structure. That one issue has to do with a deep, personal experience of non-separation. Every tradition suggests we drop selfishness and care for others. This is a wonderful idea and many

people devote their lives to its expression. However, to be transformative, this realization of non-separation has to be more than a spiritual concept or even a commitment to good acts. From wherever we start, the task is the same - a deep shift in consciousness that actually no longer sees an “us and them,” **and knows this to be the deepest and most truthful reality.**

Of course, this is not some new or unique revelation. However, actually engaging in deeply committed spiritual practices - whatever the tradition - that support this rather dramatic shift in consciousness offers the potential for real healing. This shift begins and is supported by personal, psychological maturity. We naturally move from an egocentric “me,” to a socio-centric “us,” to a world-centric “all of us,” if things go well.

The philosopher Ken Wilber states:

“... development, for the most part, involves decreasing narcissism and increasing consciousness, or the ability to take other people, places, and things into account and thus increasingly extend care to each other... Each stage of development is a decrease in narcissism and an increase in consciousness (or an increase in the capacity to take deeper and wider perspectives into account)...The spiral of development is a spiral of compassion, expanding from me, to us, to all of us: there standing open to an integral embrace.”<sup>1</sup>

In order to appreciate the shared commonalities and wonderful diversity in the world **we have to have a consciousness that can perform that function** of true acceptance and engagement.

Sister Mary Rose McPhee, the creative founder of Seton Cove, offered each speaker in this series a short paper by Patricia Mische from “Whole Earth Papers” entitled, “Toward a Global Spirituality.” In it, the author states that, “Authentic spirituality is **awakening awareness and conscious attunement** to the sacred source of life.” Awakened awareness is a good description of this developmental shift and conscious attunement is the actual function of seeing the other *as one’s self*. She goes on to say:

“We have become as gods with the power to create and destroy life. But we have not developed the inner wisdom to manage these new powers in life-preserving ways. There has been a dangerous shift in our development – a lag that is both spiritual and systemic.”

So the challenge seems to be one of putting as much attention on our personal and spiritual development as we have on the development of things like technology or military effectiveness. What if we – and I mean all of us – actually saw each other in this deeply compassionate way? What if we were not afraid of our differences and didn't recoil in fear or cover our terror with violence? What if our greatest commitment was to such a shift in consciousness so that we would **become** the peace that we hope to create? As Thomas Merton once said after reflecting on one of his own experiences of unity consciousness, "...I suppose the big problem would be that we would fall down and worship each other."

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<sup>i</sup> [A Theory of Everything, pp. 18-22]