

Pilgrimage of Companionship: Walking with the Spiritual but Not Religious

by Catherine and Gil Stafford

Max's text read, "A mutual friend recommended you. I don't have any religious background, but I've had an experience I can't make sense of. Could we chat over text?"

I wrote, "Sure. Tell me about your experience."

"Paranormal, maybe? My mom died. Now she's talking to me."

"In your dreams? Or while you're awake?"

"Awake."

"What'd she say?"

"Be careful."

"What'd you think she meant?"

"Not sure."

"Is there something you should be wary of?"

"You mean like everything in the world?"

"Indeed. But more specific. Like your personal life?"

We offer spiritual companionship via text, phone, e-mail, Skype, walking mountainous trails, sitting in coffee shops and pubs, or wherever someone needs to hold safe space. Max's text led to multiple Skype conversations. After a year, Max suggested we meet for coffee, and we still connect regularly. The topics roam the pilgrimage landscape of spiritual companion relationships; we walk foggy paths while trusting the intuitional muse. We did not set out to establish a specific contemplative practice or create a community for the "spiritual but not religious." We have simply lived the pilgrimage life—a long walk of companionship, mutually seeking wisdom, asking questions, soulfully listening, and focused on healing the soul. Still, community and shared practices did emerge.

Max, like many of our spiritual companions, could loosely be described as spiritual but not religious. Max is part of a growing populous that constitutes what American philosophy professor Jeffrey Kripal says is "a quiet, but radical, rejection of religion in all its dogmatic and dangerous forms" (Dick, 626)—not in search of "the" truth but, instead, desiring a reality of lived experiences with the collective divine. (We will use the term "collective divine" as a reference to the neopanthestic concept of a universal divinity, including the collective conscious

and the collective unconscious; seen and unseen; and all that has ever been, is present, and will ever be.) Research continues to produce global evidence of the advancing number of people who self-identify as spiritual but not religious as well as those declaring themselves either as atheist, agnostic, or nothing in particular. The phenomena exist not only in Western culture but also broadly in Abrahamic traditions and in Eastern religious countries. (See particularly Sevinç, Coleman, and Hood as well as Todd and Cohen.)

Categories can be off-putting, particularly for those intentionally choosing to live outside the religious marketplace, or frightening for those unable to leave their religion. From our experience, though, the spiritual but not religious a) like Max, have no religious background, are possibly agnostic, but have interest in spirituality, b) were abandoned by their religion but still seek a spirituality, c) have left their religion for any number of reasons never to return, yet still are spiritually curious, or d) are atheist, with or without a religious background, yet have had an experience, possibly through meditation, that eludes description. There are at least two other groups with which we connect. Such a discussion, however, requires another essay. They are the mentally ill found outside of religion but expressing spiritual experiences and the developmentally disabled who might be spiritual but not religious, but exhibit a definite spirituality. Almost all the spiritual but not religious share a desire to express a spiritual authenticity. Reportedly, Deepak Chopra said, "Religion is belief in someone else's experience; spirituality is having your own experience." As companions, our role is to assist the self-discovery and articulation of their spiritual experience.

Candace Lewis, PhD, self-defines as "non-religious but spiritual." Lewis is a neuroscientist and a Fulbright Scholar who researches dynamic environmental and genetic influences on brain-behavior relationships. She is a graduate of Wisdom's Way Interfaith School and was a 2019 New Contemplative at the Spiritual Directors International (SDI) annual conference. Her reflections on the conference speak for themselves and possibly others who are spiritual but not religious. Courageous words require "brave space" (Ali, 3). With permission, we have shared her comments written to us in an email.

I did not expect so much "religion" (at the conference) to be in the spotlight. The typical discourse within my communities at home center[s] on nature, politics, tears, beauty, social justice, culture, sex, altered states of consciousness, growth, pain, love and a whole lot of fun. With intention, we steer clear of the language, signs, customs and traditions of world religions. Because quite frankly, these symbols are so heavily associated with war, rape, oppression and greed, not only of the past but of today. The staleness of traditional religion is appalling to many modern spiritual people, who have never, and will never, step foot in a church, temple, synagogue, or mosque. Personally, I love holy spaces and feel a connection to them. However, I long for a world in which we acknowledge the disgraces of the past, burn down the places of horrors, and rebuild in the name of the victims and the future.

Such a spirituality can appear elusive in the contemporary world, where bits and pieces of the truth can be simultaneously everywhere and nowhere and where religions are dialectic, both true and false at the same time. Though vague in intellectual definition, an experience of the collective divine can be unearthed on the pilgrim's labyrinth. The serpentine path is a ground of indelible authenticity. Walking, the pilgrim becomes an apprenticeship of poetic wisdom; spatial, not temporal; a transmutation of reality.

Walking Pilgrimage with the Spiritual but Not Religious

We have led seven walking pilgrimages with the spiritual but not religious through Ireland's Wicklow Mountains. The rugged one hundred miles are a strenuous test, potentially opening a fissure in the mind, body, soul, and spirit. We have walked among dozens of pilgrims, some walking alone, others in pairs, laughing, singing, and telling stories. At times, one or two drifted alongside for a chat.

Randi and Julian connected with us through a young adult community we helped establish. They are bisexual and now in a relationship. Randi had been a foster child, bouncing from home to home. During Randi's early high school years, their foster parents were part of a small, extremely conservative church. Randi's family did not celebrate holidays, demanded a strict dress code, and insisted on excluding outsiders. Randi challenged this lifestyle and was subsequently shunned by the foster family and their church. As a teenager, Randi lived homeless for a month until rescued by a compassionate high school teacher. With a brilliant mind and sheer will, Randi made a commitment that they would never rely on another person. By Randi's mid-twenties, they were successfully navigating the path through graduate school.

Julian had grown up in the southern region of the United States. Julian's parents were well educated and supportive. The family was comfortably ensconced in America's evangelicalism. Julian's relationship with their family was "lovely, until I told them I was queer. The same could be said for my relationship with my ex-church, who abandoned me when they heard I was gay."

The conversation with Randi and Julian began a long slow pilgrimage through loss, death, grief, heartache, break-up, loneliness, renewal, marriage, and childbirth. The context was always within the space of the collective divine, while the content was never religious. Such narratives are laden with the potential for simultaneous transmutation of the storyteller and the listener. For to engage in the mutuality of dense conversations demands a risk from everyone sitting in the circle—both those seen and the unseen (those who have influenced our lives but are not sitting in the circle). We "live each other's death and die each other's life" (Heraclitus, quoted in Yeats, 145). Listening demands space and spiritual time, no matter where the conversation manifests.

Chiron appeared as wise as their name might allude. Chiron was a fluid person in both appearance and speech but poignant in presence—maybe it was the wheelchair. Chiron's words were delivered like an axe against an icy wall—intentional, precise, swift, and ironic.

"Have you read Maggie Nelson's *Bluets*?" Chiron challenged us. "Doesn't matter. Nelson uses the term *spiritual cripple*. [See Nelson, 48.] Not in defining her belief or disbelief in God, but her willingness to wrestle with the question of God. I love Nelson's work. In the midst of her own depression, Nelson's mentor suffers a tragic bicycle accident, leaving her a paraplegic. Like me, except mine was a misstep off a rock climb. Anyway, Maggie spends days, weeks, months helping nurse her mentor, her friend, back to life, a new normal. Reading Nelson strikes an obvious chord with me, forces me to revisit my musing about God. I wonder, if there is a God, that God must be sitting in a wheelchair, like me. The Disabled God. [See Eiesland, 23.] I need a God who is embodied in this body. A posthuman body. Have you read Katherine Hayles? It doesn't matter.

“I don’t have any use for religion. Not after my accident. The religious said trite and hurtful things. Always the dualistic motif; God equals good. Satan equals bad. But what about bad things happening to good people? Come on, God created the tree of knowledge, of good and bad; both exist on God’s behest. There’s a balance, a yin and yang. Right? God perfectly disabled; the good suffered bad.”

As the spiritual companion, I half said to myself that I would have to wrestle with Chiron’s convincing argument of God being both good and bad.

Chiron smirked and went on. “Been wondering a lot about artificial intelligence. There’s a ton of research with implications for the disabled. It’s one thing to imagine body part replacement, but what about placing my mind in a cyborg? Transformed from crippled life to an infinite life inside a machine. Heavy stuff. Have you read Philip K. Dick? He’s your contemporary. Okay, boomer. No offense. Well, maybe. Anyway, have you read the *Exegesis of Philip K. Dick*? It doesn’t matter. Well, maybe it does. Have you?”

A thoughtful response is sometimes trapped in space, yet absent of time. Chiron is not asking a yes or no question. Have we read Maggie Nelson, Katherine Hayles, Philip K. Dick, and *The Disabled God* by Nancy Eiesland? Chiron is asking what fuels our spiritual evolution. Are we versed enough in queer theology, disabled studies, and posthumanism? He asks us not to respond but to hear at the level of mutuality.

Chiron invoked a space of mutuality. Our internal work affected by their work. Chiron handed us heavy stones for our pack. “Take nothing literal,” George Gurdjieff advised (Gurdjieff, 4); much, if not all, is a metaphor. Literal or metaphoric, permanent or transient, everyone travels life’s pilgrimage—walking, climbing a cliff, or rolling a chair.

Max and I were sitting under a tree. “I was reading this book about John Dee,” Max said. “Dee was trying to communicate with angels. My mom’s an angel now, so I thought I’d check it out. The author suggested an inverse Kabbalistic name for ALLA would be ALLALA, God is not, not (Louv, 112). That took me down the Internet rabbit hole into Plato, Pythagoras, Neoplatonism, Gnosticism, Kabbalah, Hermeticism, alchemy. Crazy stuff.”

“It’s called spiritual alchemy or negative theology. God is the absence. God is the silence,” I said.

“I’ve never heard God talk. Have you?”

“You’ve heard your mom talk.”

Silence. Max stared into the tea leaves at the bottom of his cup.

After a bit, I continued. “My sister has Prader-Willi syndrome; she’s developmentally disabled. When I ask a question, she says, ‘I not, not know.’ I used to think she didn’t have an answer. But maybe she was talking about God? Maybe God is not, not. The absent God is where God is not seen, not heard, not felt, not experienced. God in the absence is maybe presence or God’s shadow?”

"I not, not know," quipped Max.

Later that night, I blinked at Max's text. "Do you think I'm crazy?"

"No. But, I see a therapist for my depression."

"I like what you said this afternoon about depression. What was it?"

"Inspired melancholy—a holy madness both Plato and Aristotle mused could lead to divinity."

"So, you think a therapist could help me become a god? Haha."

"Probably not. But if they do, let me know. I might want to give them a try."

For various reasons, spiritual companions can get thrust into the therapist role. Obviously, unless otherwise trained, spiritual companions must resist. We do not diagnose or prescribe. We can, however, recognize, recommend, and be present. And we do provide a safe space where our companions can fully express themselves free of any judgment. Candace has been vulnerable in sharing her experience of being a New Contemplative. Such an openness is a good example of what being a spiritual companion for the spiritual but not religious can look like. In an email, Candace shared her experience with us.

"As a New Contemplative, I wasn't sure what our role would be. Perhaps I daydreamed of intimate talks of the divine, trading dark poems of pain and longing, speaking with wise women who have paved the way and are still fighting the patriarchy of Abrahamic traditions ... these daydreams did not come to pass. In my 'nonreligious but spiritual' community, we seek to know the cosmos in her infinite mystery through getting to know each other and ourselves in mind, body, and spirit. At the Spiritual Directors International Conference, I felt like a shiny thing being paraded about and applauded; talked about but not listened to; introduced but not held in deep wonder; looked at but not seen."

As spiritual companions, we experience our relationships with the spiritual but not religious as a lifestyle of listening, holding in wonder, and truly seeing, and also a way of being in the world—sometimes a mystery, other times a dream. Like seven spiraled pilgrimages, layers of process: mine, theirs, ours. Always asking, what do we need in our spiritual companion's backpack today?

What's in the Spiritual Companion's Backpack?

When we lead walking pilgrimages, we offer three suggestions: 1) train for the terrain, 2) purchase quality boots and break them in, and 3) pack less than 15 percent of your body weight. We extend those same suggestions to our Wisdom School as they prepare to become spiritual companions: 1) train at the craft, 2) walk hundreds of metaphoric miles before declaring yourself a companion, and 3) carry only the spiritual practices you use.

The spiritual companion is a living backpack, walking the wisdom path, accompanying, listening wholly with holy ears, asking open-ended questions, offering a timely story. The mutuality of experience expands boundaries of spirituality, leaving us aching for a language to articulate our transmutation. To affect souls, we must become at ease with our discomfort, holding safe space while others spiritually thrash. The practices we briefly discuss below are those we have found beneficial in the spiritual companioning relationship: (w)holy listening, pilgrimage, spiritual alchemy, meditation, contemplation, mindfulness, the labyrinth, tarot, dream work, ally work, the Enneagram, and the Circle Way.

(W)holy Listening

“I have a therapist I’ve been seeing for two years. She’s been helpful. Still, I feel the need for something deeper, more, but I’m not sure what,” began Sarah at our first meeting.

“What are you thinking ‘more’ might be?”

“I’m beginning to become more aware of my path—not the one influenced by my upbringing in a fundamentalist church, or my father’s harsh condemning words, or my husband’s lack of understanding of my needs. I want to live more in the energy field of Spirit, who I believe is Love. I think I need a spiritual guide.”

Rabbi Jacob Staub said, “The spiritual director serves as a companion and witness, someone who helps you (sometimes with questions, sometimes just by listening) to discern the divine where you might have missed it and to integrate that awareness into your daily life” (“Jewish Spiritual Direction”).

As companions, we listen and hold sacred space. We are present to Sarah and others without judgment, together, exploring those deep, dark corners of life, often hidden from view. It is an art form, more than strategies or skills or the right open-ended question, where the gift of undivided attention includes silence, reflection, and hearing with the heart. We offer space for the companion to hear a wisdom dwelling deep within, bringing new insights into their daily life. These illuminations of the soul appear when we are the ears of the holy, listening with our whole being; our intellect, emotions, spirit, and body.

Later in our relationship, Sarah shared that she had begun making mandalas, inspired by Kay Lindahl’s book *The Sacred Art of Listening*. Sarah had never seen a mandala, much less drawn one. Words do not do justice to the outpouring of her soul into these striking mandalas. This work has brought healing to her suppressed life and power to her voice long silenced. Poetry began to flow from her mandalas. She was “showing” that she was (w)holy listening to her new path, which was affecting her family, friends, and spiritual companion. Listening is like a homeopathic remedy—like heals like; companions heal one another.

Pilgrimage as a Way of Life

Wisdom Walking: Pilgrimage as a Way of Life is a book of shared stories of pilgrims who walked Ireland’s Wicklow Way, as well as those who traveled through addiction, recovery, grief, mental illness, and potential defeat. The companion’s life is the pilgrimage of a thousand miles of blisters and backaches, multifarious layers of switchbacks and spirals where “God is an

infinite sphere, the center of which is everywhere, the circumference nowhere” (quoted in Yates, 38). This journey can cause us to lean into a spirituality that is sensitive beyond the particularity of his or her own religious tradition with practices that are intent on healing us and the cosmos. The spirituality of pilgrimage widens the capacity for holding a richer imagination of the simultaneous relationship with the collective divine and the other. We are expanding a sacred cauldron to become capacious enough to imagine the spark of divinity brewing in all of what was, is, and will ever be.

Offering pilgrimage opportunities for the spiritual but not religious is vitally necessary. First, advise sparingly about travel and physical preparation. Second, do not overplan the trip. Make sure they have safe lodging and access to plenty of good food, then let them walk. It is in the walking where spiritual conversations organically emerge. The spiritual but not religious will resist contrived experiences. The spiritual companion can simply walk, be present, and listen. Third, the unexpected and spontaneous experience is the best. Ask such questions as: What are you sensing? What thoughts arise? What feelings emerge? What are you imagining? Revel in surprise and cherish authentic spirituality, which can be the genesis of spiritual alchemy.

Spiritual Alchemy

Spiritual alchemy, or psychological alchemy, is the metaphoric process of the integration of mind, body, psyche (soul), and spirit. The ancient mystical traditions from which spiritual alchemy emerge contain the ingredients necessary for the reemergence and remembering of a forgotten alchemical craft of the spiritual companion. Every story we have told in this article has gone through the cauldron of spiritual alchemy.

The companion’s spiritual alchemy of imagination is a living space of human fluidity, a “reflexivity.” Such is the space where the spiritual companion coparticipates in “the work” of the self, the other, and the Other. In this experience of mutuality, the participants generate reality and simultaneously become enfolded within Reality. The companion no longer sees themselves outside the Other or beyond the relationship with the other. Reality, instead, is being fully at one with the divine, oneself, and with all of creation. Every conversation, every telephone call, every text, every e-mail, every tweet, every form of communication, and every experience is a moment for oneness—the work of companionship through spiritual alchemy.

The work of spiritual alchemy is a four-layered, spiral process mirroring the ancient ritual of Ireland’s Neolithic Celts, a Winter Solstice pilgrimage into Newgrange, the five-thousand-year-old labyrinthine tomb. There the Celts would bury the remains of their dead and pray for soul’s rebirth.

Phase one of spiritual alchemy begins in the stormy night. The pilgrim travails through chaotic despair. With moonlight eclipsed, fear overwhelms, paralyzing mind, body, psyche, and spirit. The Renaissance Hermetics poetically referred to this as the genesis of “inspired melancholy.”

During phase two, the pilgrim reaches the mouth of Newgrange. Entering the tomb, the thunder no longer frightens, the lightning no longer threatens, the rain no longer drowns, and instead the darkness pours in and another fear takes over. What if we cannot find our way? One can travel the descent into the sunless labyrinth alone. Or one can walk with a companion, who takes our

hand and leads us down the dark path. During the uncertainty of this journey, our senses and intuitions are poured into the heart of Newgrange's alchemical cauldron. These pairs of opposites—fear and hope, dread and anticipation, and worst case and best case—are stirred into the milieu of “what ifs.” Having reached the center of the alchemist's spiritual temple, we wait in the void of an expectant tomb-womb. We stop, breathe, reflect, and imagine; the artistry within now unfolds as the genius of “inspired melancholy.”

Phase three is sparked as sunlight begins to edge out the interior darkness; the heart is illuminated with numinous imagination. Thoughts and feelings give rise for the improbable to be born. A spark that heals, restores, and renews catches fire. Thankfully, our companion regulates the heat of the womb's center from which the brilliance of the soul's “inspired melancholy” births light.

During phase four, the pilgrim must let go of the companion's nurturing hand. The pilgrim begins the climb out of Newgrange's labyrinth. As a phoenix, the pilgrim follows the solstice sun into the morning light. Reborn, the pilgrim is now a revitalized spirit, a tincture for healing a wounded world.

Spiritual alchemy represents the ambiguous nature of the pilgrimage experience, a metaphor for the paradoxical and indeterminate boundaries existing between each step of the evolution. The process of spiritual alchemy rarely produces a one-time nugget of gold. More often, the transmutation is manifested over a lifetime of experiences, each containing only a tincture of wisdom. Those who walk the risky miles of the pilgrim's path learn the spiritual-way lessons of the ancient ones; life is filled with repeated alchemical cycles built one spiraled layer upon another, some happening simultaneously. Spiritual companions walk this spiraled journey together as a pilgrim's apprenticeship; a relationship of mutual transmutation; a sharing of stories, tears, and balm—certificates of completion unnecessary.

Meditation, Contemplation, and Mindfulness

These three practices are central to many of our companions: meditation, the intention of absence; contemplation, the intention of presence; and mindfulness, the intention of living. Singularly these practices can alter the state of consciousness; practiced in concert, they can bring the transmutation of how one lives, moves, and has their being in the world.

Mark is a surgeon and calls himself a mystic atheist. He does not have any religious background. His parents and grandparents were atheist. He says he is not a “hard atheist,” over the years becoming more comfortable and less judgmental of the plethora of religious beliefs and practices expressed around him. He has studied world religions and the lives of spiritual leaders and is familiar with spiritual direction. He does not believe in a higher power but practices meditation, contemplation, and mindfulness. Through faithful commitment to these practices, he has experienced an instance of what he described as “all knowing.”

Mark simultaneously represents the edge and the center of being spiritual but not religious. Our personal experience is that more of the people we companion are closer to Mark's beliefs and practices than those of an avowed religious person. The former is the growing edge of a new faith milieu, and the latter is a populous in decline.

Labyrinth

The labyrinth is more than a spiritual metaphor; it is an accessible experience for incorporating the integration of the mind, body, soul, and spirit—the essence of spiritual alchemy. Walking the labyrinth is a universal act, devoid of religious language and without the demands of a singular or correct way to engage. The labyrinth's sacred geometry enfolds the circle, the mandala, the spiral, and the Enneagram. As part of our Wisdom School, we offer an in-depth experience of walking the labyrinth, which is open to the public.

Ritual Work

At our Wisdom School and Ireland retreats, we include ritual development as an ingredient to the experience. We assist our companions in creating rituals for their spiritual contemplative practice, including beginnings, endings, and rites of passage. While the spiritual but not religious might avoid religious gatherings, they often want communal ceremonies for life's milestones. Ritual requires purpose (What's the point of the ritual?), space (Where will it take place?), time (How is the time used?), and element (What elements are necessary to conduct the ritual?). Components of such a planned experience are intertwined, mutually affecting the interrelated choices made about the other. What words, places, things, actions, and people will express our interior thoughts, feelings, and intuitions into the exterior sensate world? Like jazz, improvisation practiced by skilled musicians, well-sculpted rituals bring freshness to our need for a shared display of those special moments in the human experience.

Tarot

Relying on the ancient web of spiritual alchemy, the tarot is a mirror of the archetypal journey. The milestone events of our life are captured in the Pilgrim's Journey through the twenty-two "Major Arcana." The daily spirals of life are reflected in the "Minor Arcana," the suits of elemental typology: swords (air and thinking), pentacles (earth and sensing), cups (water and feeling), and wands (fire and intuition). We are not victims of the random choices of cosmic winds but instead coparticipants with the spark of the collective divine growing within us all. To that end, at times, we suggest that our spiritual companions use tarot cards to tell their story. The artistic rendering of the cards provides safe space for the theatrics of soul and shadow, the sublime and subtle, and the sacred and secular.

To explore the use of tarot in spiritual companionship, we offer a class for the curious and the playful as an introduction into the tarot. We provide multiple versions of tarot decks and an interactive companionship through the archetypal narrative.

Dream Work

Providing the tools for dream work is instrumental in developing a rich relationship with the personal and collective unconscious. The spiritual companion affords a safe place where dreams can be recounted and amplified (Jung, *Dreams*). The unconscious speaks through dreams when we process our personal work in the external practices of pilgrimage, spiritual alchemy, labyrinth walking, creating ritual, tarot, ally work, the Enneagram, journaling, and other methods.

Ally Work

Working with our spiritual allies whether they be angels, spirit animals, or manifestations of the names and aspects of the divine, can expand our connection with the spiritual realm of the unseen. Jungian psychologist Jeffrey Raff has written four excellent books on discovering and working with the ally (an example is *The Practice of Ally Work: Meeting and Partnering with Your Spirit Guide in the Imaginal World*). Raff, a student of a protégé of Carl Jung's, Marie-Louise von Franz, has developed an accessible technique for being in a relationship with our allies. Using Jung's method of active imagination, Raff encourages us to write our own version of Jung's *Red Book*. Ally work is also a good place for those interested in reincarnation, the transmigration of souls (metempsychosis), and synchronicity (the uncanny).

Enneagram

We incorporate the Enneagram and Myers-Briggs Type Indicator into our companioning work to explore personality typing. Both present the possibility of an integration of the complex spectrum of the human personality. We incorporate G. I. Gurdjieff's mystical interpretation of the nine-pointed star into our spiritual interpretation of the types. Gurdjieff's model provides us with a holographic depiction of human multidimensionalism with space for future evolution. This article does not allow the space to discuss the intricacies of such a theory; instead, we recommend *The Intelligent Enneagram* (Blake). Our companions appreciate a broader view of the Enneagram, for it decentralizes the categorization of personality typing in favor of integration.

We have developed a journal that creates space on the page for both personality typology and the multidimensional worldview. This journal provides an exterior container for the work of the Enneagram, the Circle, dream work, ally work, and mindful practices, affording a visual reminder of the interior work of integrating the aspects of the complex personality.

Wisdom's Way Interfaith School

Our Wisdom School, now in its fifth year, is located in Phoenix, Arizona, USA. The school is one of two that operate under the auspices of Tacheria Interfaith Spirituality Center in Tucson, Arizona. Tacheria is in its twenty-fifth year as a nonprofit organization. Catherine is the director of Wisdom's Way Interfaith School and serves as an ex-officio member of the Tacheria Board. (For more information, see 2wisdomsway.com and tacheria.org.)

The school is a two-year program for those interested in expanding their capacity for (w)holy listening and building spiritual contemplative practices for themselves and their community. The majority of those who attend the school consider themselves spiritual but not religious. And many are committed to their personal formation in becoming a spiritual companion.

In our Wisdom School, we are exposed to a variety of spiritualities and practices, including Buddhism, Hinduism, Judaism, Islam, esoteric Christianity, Native American spirituality, Celtic spirituality, alchemy, the intersection of science and faith, shamanism, witchcraft, yoga, and sound healing, while engaging in heartfelt and lively conversations.

As leaders of the school, we are open that we personally practice a spirituality of the mystical (not, not), in union with the collective divine (neopanteism), in harmony with others through universal wisdom (pansophia), found in ancient history (neoperennialism). We also make it clear that no one else is expected to adopt our practices. In our Wisdom School, we use a language

fitting with Karen Erlichman's definition as "Holy Hybrid." She writes as a spiritual companion who views herself as "both/and: privileged/oppressed; included/excluded; cisgender/queer; secular/religious." The spiritual companion lives in a world where she "long[s] for a word that describes (her) practices, alchemy, hybrid, integrative, intersectional, wholeness, living undivided" (Erlichman, 13).

And while our school is dominated by the spiritual but not religious, we also serve people like the "New Contemplative," Episcopal priest Rich Nelson of Spiritual Directors International, who wrote these words in *Connections*: "What does it say that I, a white, straight, Christian man who lives in Texas and wears cowboy boots, feels more in tune with a reiki practitioner, an African-American womanist, a Filipino beekeeper, a Latina social worker, a spiritual geneticist, a New York Shaman, the first blind female rabbi, and a black, queer trans man than I do with many in my own tradition?" (R. Nelson, 3). Wisdom's Way Interfaith School functions as a living circle, a safe space for the weary to refresh and the curious to spread their wings. Here we practice safe space in the Circle Way, the cauldron of our life together.

A Community of the Circle Way

"There is no place, no community, no friends or family in my life like this." We hear this over and over again from the people who come to our Wisdom School.

"I feel safe to be vulnerable, or silent, or an emotional wreck, or joyful, with no guilt. With no one trying to save me, offer advice, or setting me straight. I'm free to explore my deepest, darkest secrets and questions with no judgment."

We practice (w)holy listening through engaging the Circle Way as developed by Christina Baldwin and Ann Linnea (see their book *The Circle Way*). Catherine was trained at an Advanced Practicum with Amanda Fenton and Tenneson Woolf (see thecircleway.net). They told Catherine that "people are hungry to turn to one another, to be in connection and community. Circle Way—as power, principle and practice—creates a container for that turning to happen in meaningful and soul changing ways." In contrast to modernity's well-entrenched norm of the triangle's hierarchical top-down power model, we sit in a circle, activating one of our most ancient social processes and archetypes, inviting everyone to equal participation. The Circle is a way to reestablish social partnerships and collaboration from all the participants, welcoming diversity and open-minded conversations leading us to an opportunity for evolutionary transmutation. For the Circle to be safe space, we agree to strict confidentiality; personal stories and conversations remain in the Circle, not to be shared outside. We listen with compassion and curiosity while withholding judgment. We remember to speak with intention, asking for what we need and offering what we can give. We make the commitment to contribute to the well-being of the whole group. We offer each other the empowering and healing gifts of silence and laughter.

Even sitting in one-to-one companion time, the circle practices of confidentiality, listening with compassionate intention, and tending to the well-being of the companions are evident, especially when the words are prophetic and brave.

Once again, with Candace's permission, we share this:

I know why I left organized religion. Do you know why you stayed? Do you care to understand a generation who has intentionally left to discover and build a more authentic spiritual belonging? Perhaps you feel a belonging in your tradition, but do you want to know why others do not? I am not saying to ditch the bells and smells, but I do wonder if the protection of tradition is keeping you too comfortable? In the realm of our comfort we often miss opportunities for growth. My friends, comfort and growth cannot co-exist.

The Circle provides safe space without judgment for such a frank challenge. For the Circle is a container for wisdom, provocation, and the unexpected. A Wisdom's Way graduate sent this text: "I had to fill out a form asking my religious preference today and I wrote Wisdom's Way. I could have written all and none, within and without, a googolplex of possibilities ... but the doctor might have been concerned about my mental health." Those more interested in a spiritual experience instead of someone else's religious dogma are often considered at the fringe, maybe even dabbling in madness. Such is Wisdom's Way, companionship in the Circle.

While the school's goals do not include sending students out in the world to create their own circles, that happens. Our Wisdom School has birthed circles from those who have found a way to widen and deepen their spirituality while including others—circles where the spiritual but not religious can find refuge and support.

Our experience of companioning the spiritual but not religious has been like a thousand spiraled pilgrimages—each one complete with the simultaneous feelings of a spiritual high and an emotional hangover. While offering ourselves in humility and vulnerability, we are the ones richer for the privilege of walking alongside our fellow pilgrims. Souls healing souls.

References

Ali, Diana. "Safe Spaces and Brave Spaces: Historical Context and Recommendations for Student Affairs Professionals." *NASPA Policy and Practices Series 2* (October 2017): 1–12.

Baldwin, Christina, and Ann Linnea. *The Circle Way: A Leader in Every Chair*. San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler, 2010.

Blake, A. G. E. *The Intelligent Enneagram*. Boston: Shambhala, 1996.
The Circle Way. <http://www.thecircleway.net>.

Cohen, Signe. "Atheism Has Long Been a Part of Asian Traditions." *Asiatimes.com*, April 7, 2019.

Cousineau, Phil. *The Art of Pilgrimage: The Seeker's Guide to Making Travel Sacred*. Berkeley, CA: Conari Press, 1998.

Dick, Philip K. *The Exegesis of Philip K Dick*. Edited by Pamela Jackson and Jonathan Lethem. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2011.

Eiesland, Nancy. *The Disabled God: Toward a Liberatory Theology of Disability*. Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1994.

Erlichman, Karen. "Holy Hybrid." *Connections* 28, no. 3 (August 2019): 12–13.

Gurdjieff, G.I. *In Search of Being: The Fourth Way of Consciousness*. Boston: Shambhala, 2012.

"Jewish Spiritual Direction." Spiritual Directors International. Accessed March 4, 2020. <https://www.sdiworld.org/find-a-spiritual-director/what-is-spiritual-direction/jewish-spiritual-direction>.

Jung, C. G. *Dreams*. New York: Routledge Press, 2002.———. *The Red Book*, London: Norton, 2009.

Lindahl, Kay. *The Sacred Art of Listening: Forty Reflections for Cultivating a Spiritual Practice*. Woodstock, VT: SkyLight Paths Publishing, 2002.

Louv, Jason. *John Dee and the Empire of Angels: Enochian Magick and the Occult Roots of the Modern World*. Rochester, VT: Inner Traditions, 2018.

Nelson, Maggie. *Bluets*, Seattle, WA: Wave Books, 2009.

Nelson, Rich. "The Missing Revolution." *Connections* 28, no. 1 (February 2019): 1–3.

Raff, Jeffrey. *The Practice of Ally Work: Meeting and Partnering with Your Spirit Guide in the Imaginal World*. Berwick, ME: Nicolas-Hays, 2006.

Sevinç, Kenan, Thomas J. Coleman III, and Ralph W. Hood Jr. "Non-Belief: An Islamic Perspective." *Secularism and Nonreligion* 7, no. 1 (2018).

Tacheria Interfaith Spirituality Center. <http://www.tacheria.org>.

Todd, Douglas. "Why Are East Asians Not into Religion?" *Vancouver Sun*, April 27, 2009. <https://secularismandnonreligion.org/articles/10.5334/snr.111/>.

2 Wisdom's Way, LLC. <https://www.2wisdomsway.com>.

Yates, Francis. *The Occult Philosophy in the Elizabethan Age*, London: Routledge, 1979.

Yeats, W. B. *A Vision*, rev. ed., 1937. In *The Collected Works of W. B. Yeats, Volume XIV*. Edited by Margaret Mills Harper and Catherine E. Paul. New York: Scribner, 2015