

Enduring, Daily Interfaith Cooperation

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Readings

Swami Vivekananda's remarks to the Parliament of the World's Religions Chicago

September 11, 1893

I thank you in the name of the most ancient order of monks in the world: I thank you in the name of millions and millions of Hindu people of all classes and sects.

I will quote from a hymn from my earliest boyhood, which is every day repeated by millions of human beings: *as the different streams having their sources in different places all mingle their water in the sea, so, O Lord, the different paths which [people] take through different tendencies, various though they appear, crooked or straight, all lead to Thee.*

The present convention which is one of the most august assemblies ever held, is a declaration to the world of the wonderful doctrine preached in the Gita, *whoever comes to me, through whatever form, I reach them, all people are struggling through paths which in the end lead to Me.*

Invocation by Bishop William Swing, Circle of Light Benefit Dinner

United Religions Initiative (URI) April 24, 2023

URI means leaving home and comfort zone, not as a tourist, but as a pilgrim . . . crossing over the boundary lines of religion, politics, nationalities, looking for – of all things – kinship. How are we related?

URI means taking the bold first step into the unknown, improvising, earnestly hoping to discover a larger family, and striving to create a dedicated global community.

URI means Humanity. Whereas the world tends to depersonalize and segregate people into liberal or conservative, Palestinian or Israeli, believers and non-believers, URI hunts for the humanity of a person.

URI means Unity. The final words of URI's purpose statement are: ". . . for the Earth and all living beings." The Earth, every blooming, breathing part of it – this constitutes the object of URI's vocation.

I titled today's message *Enduring Daily Interfaith Cooperation* because I wanted to emphasize that interfaith cooperation really does take enduring daily effort. Wherever we are in the world, and at whatever level – at the macro level confronting national policies and cultural mores that perpetrate religious hate and prejudice, or at a micro level, just trying to sustain healthy, loving relationships within our own family and local community, interfaith acceptance and cooperation is happening because of the enduring daily commitment of courageous and committed people.

The good news is that in 1995, the idea that religions could actually cooperate and work together for common good was declared *impossible* by many. Now twenty-five years later, knowledge about other religions has increased, mutual respect among people of different religions is accepted much more widely, and the capacity to hold onto one's own religious identity and embrace other traditions as well is growing all over the world. Things have changed, and are changing for the better!

A case in point, on a personal note: In 1995 I was invited to attend a big gathering of the United Muslims of America in San Jose. I am humbled to admit that at that time I was scared to go by myself. I didn't know anything about Islam and didn't know what to expect. Maybe people would be hostile toward me? Was it ok for a single woman to show up by myself? In those days, I think many people, like me, were living in ignorance, with a healthy dose of prejudice and suspicion about religions that we had heard "tales" about, but with which we had no personal experience. Today, like so many other families, I'm proud and happy to say that my family is an interfaith family. My daughter converted to Islam in 2001, married a Muslim man from Egypt in 2008, and today I'm a proud grandmother of three grandsons, Abdallah, Musa and Iyas. And, to be honest, even though promoting interfaith cooperation has long been my professional work, for me, learning to live gracefully, honestly and lovingly with different cultural ways and religious beliefs within my own family, for all of the joys and gifts, also takes enduring care and effort.

So, yes! the good news is that interfaith acceptance and cooperation is growing around the world, especially at the grassroots level of societies. The bad news is that religiously motivated violence, stirring up hatred among people who are designated as "the other," is also flourishing and appears relentless. Today, I want to tell you about the organization that I helped to build from the ground up during the last twenty-five years, United Religions Initiative, URI. We like to emphasize "YOU ARE !!" This work continues to teach me, train me even, always to look for and value the signs of what is working. I look for and widely share stories about the good work that people are doing to transform fear and ignorance into acceptance and cooperation. I look for the "green shoots"! The "green shoots" are ordinary people stepping up and becoming remarkable peacemakers, building bridges of understanding and respect among people of different religions and spiritual traditions. "Green shoots" started growing on the planet a long time ago! Swami Vivikananda, a renowned Hindu spiritual leader, is credited with proclaiming the dawn of interfaith openness at the Parliament of the World's Religions in 1893 in Chicago. His words from the *Gita*, the ancient Hindu text, guide us now: *whoever comes to me, through whatever form I reach them, all people are struggling through paths which in the end lead to Me.*

Fast-forwarding to the beginning of URI's interfaith story in 1995, Bishop William Swing, the Episcopal Bishop of California at that time, was invited by the United Nations to bring leaders of the world religions to Grace Cathedral in San Francisco to help the UN celebrate its fiftieth anniversary. He said that he couldn't sleep all that night because he was so troubled by the question, *If the nation states have at least tried to work for peace for fifty years through the United Nations, where are the religions of the world? They are more a source of conflict than peacemaking.* He decided to commit the rest of his life to helping change that reality.

At the time, I was on staff at Grace Cathedral developing innovative spiritual programs, and I jumped onboard with a fledgling group of volunteers to join in what felt like an audacious quest: to create a new organization that would bring people from diverse religions, spiritual expressions, and indigenous traditions together to cooperate for the collective good. And for the last twenty-five years, as senior staff, I have joined with countless numbers of people around the world doing just that. When URI was just a sparkle of a vision waiting to be birthed, I created a promotional postcard with a photo of the birth of a star taken by the Hubble telescope. The words proclaimed *Join a World Waiting for the Birth of New Light – the United Religions Initiative.* The card invited people who felt drawn to its promise and light to come together and to hold this vision with humility and prayer. The Reverend Marcus Braybrooke, an early collaborator and interfaith leader from England reminded us: *When you embark on interfaith bridge building, take off your shoes, because you are on sacred ground.* As Bishop Bill Swing reiterated in his invocation at a URI event just a month ago, URI at its core is about *humanity, unity, leaving your comfort zone.*

From the first planning sessions, people spoke up and said they wanted this new organization to be inclusive, non-hierarchical, rooted in the wisdom of the world's faith traditions, focused on action, and dedicated to equitable participation of women and men. We found a way to design URI as an organization that operated from the ground up, fueled by people at the grassroots. From the beginning, URI wanted to unleash the resourcefulness, commitment, and know-how of ordinary people. Any seven people, three of whom must be from a different religion, spiritual expression, or indigenous tradition, can join the URI global network as a Cooperation Circle. We chose the name "Cooperation Circle" because people who gathered in those first meetings valued sitting in circles, looked to nature's wisdom that moves in circles, and knew that the core work required cooperation. Each Circle has its own name and autonomy. Some Circles are small in number and local; some have thousands of members; some are people who have not organized before; some are well-respected, established organizations.

URI does not provide financial support, but provides identification with a vibrant, interfaith community, a unifying global purpose and principles for action, heightened visibility, capacity-building, connection with other activists, training, and a multitude of resources. Here are some examples of Cooperation Circles:

- Coffee bean farmers in Uganda, from Christian, Jewish, and Muslim backgrounds decided that if they worked together, they could bring better quality coffee beans to market. They formed a business and joined URI as a Cooperation Circle.

- A Cooperation Circle in Venezuela, dedicated to indigenous wisdom and honoring diverse perspectives, joined Evangelical Christians and Catholics in a traditional town-to-town procession to honor the Virgin de la Paz. Since they also wanted to promote healthy living, they rode bikes and shared healthy food and conversation afterward.
- Eco Peace Teen Café was founded by a young adult, Greshma Raju, in South India. I first met Greshma just after she graduated from high school when she attended a URI peace training course. Greshma recently completed a master's degree in Peace and Environment Education and initiated the Eco Peace Teen Cafe that connects and inspires hundreds of young adults all over the world to dialogue and take climate action.
- Nepal Unites runs a School of Peace for young adult peace leaders from areas of entrenched violence in Southeast Asia. One participant, Rose, an indigenous leader focusing on children's rights in southern Philippines wrote: *I am at the School of Peace as a grassroots organizer and advocate. It is important for us to share our stories here while at the same time learning new things that we can apply in the context of our work. We believe that the School of Peace will give us more confidence as human rights workers and educators. It will also give us an opportunity to raise the awareness of the international audience about the situation of indigenous people in the Philippines.*
- Marin Interfaith, San Francisco Interfaith, Contra Costa Interfaith, and many local interfaith groups across the U.S. are URI Cooperation Circles. Each is its own entity and is also connected with the URI global network.
- Today there are 1,200 Cooperation Circles in 108 countries.

Before my URI work took off, I had an affirmation by my bedside that read, "I help create an organization that gives birth to a new humanity." Amazingly and gratefully, with boundless Divine support, I feel as though I've been given these many years at URI to do my best to live into this vision and dream. Through the years and especially now, I focus on the *green shoots growing everywhere*: the incredible passion, resilience and resourcefulness of people, the myriad actions taking place to create more peace, justice and healing. I don't expect to live to see the fruition of this potential for humanity, but I love believing in it and working towards it.

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To engage more concretely with URI's work, I want to share a URI video we made several years ago, called *We Unite*. I think it helps us experience the depth, the action, and the unifying spirit of URI. Click [here](#) to watch the video.

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Closing Blessing from Bishop William Swing

We pray, O Sacred Presence, set our feet on the pilgrim's journey, give us hearts for all humanity and bless us with the confidence that all life is in unity. Amen.