

Practicing Democracy through Multifaith Engagement



As communication becomes increasingly global, interactions with people who have different beliefs, customs, and worldviews from our own become more common. We need to learn about those who are different from us and, at a minimum, to learn how to coexist with them. Building multifaith relationships bolsters the stability of our communities and country, and it also sustains one of America’s most cherished values — freedom of religion. Here are some ways to engage with people of multiple traditions.

1

Live in Peace

One of the stated purposes of the U.S. Constitution is to insure domestic tranquility. To have this tranquility, we need to be able to achieve a level of peace with ourselves and our fellow citizens. In *Building a Global Civic Culture: Education for an Interdependent World*, sociologist Elise Boulding asserts that “the peaceable kingdom” tradition is just as present in every religious tradition as is the idea of “holy-war.” As examples, she cites Martin Buber’s model community, which was meant to embody “the highest spiritual values of Judaism while practicing a nonviolent, reconciling relationship with Arab brothers as co-tillers of the same soil;” the use of the Baha’i transnational network for the International Year of Peace in 1986; the participation of Buddhist orders in the Second Disarmament Session of the United Nations in 1984; the Catholic Worker Movement; the work of the Quaker United Nations Office; and more. We suggest cultivating the democratic virtue of peace by learning about the teachings related to peace and peace movements in your own tradition as well as in other traditions with which you are unfamiliar. One source from the Christian tradition is *Living Peace: A Spirituality of Contemplation and Action*, by Catholic priest John Dear, in which he calls us to become peacemakers “within our own broken hearts and broken families, in our bloody city streets and corrupt government offices, in the war zones and refugee camps.”

Here are 12 passages from this book that can function as “peace prompts:”

spiritualityandpractice.com/practices/literacy-world-features/view/16581/peace-prompts

2

Create Memorials

Earthquakes, tsunamis, hurricanes, wildfires, floods, mudslides, volcanic eruptions, disease outbreaks, virus epidemics, gang violence, civil wars, refugees displaced from their homes, oppression and suppression of freedoms by dictatorial leaders, water and air pollution — the list of tragedies and atrocities keeps growing every day. Some of them are rightly attributed to religious differences. We have much to remember, many to pray for, and much to atone for. Host an open service at your place of worship to remember the deceased and those in need. Respond to these events by joining together to offer prayers for forgiveness, mercy, goodness, safety, and protection. Examples of such prayers can be found in Spirituality & Practice’s [Praying the News](#) blog.

3

Honor Multifaith Leaders

In *The Difference a Day Makes*, Karen M. Jones, author and founder of Benevolent Planet, suggests recognizing a local citizen peacekeeper for his or her anti-violence efforts. Leaders could also be honored for their efforts in building bridges between spiritual communities. Recommend to your congregation, your local Multifaith Council, or your community center that you hold an event to honor a local citizen for his or her efforts in encouraging the practice of democratic values and virtues.

4

Take a Multifaith Road Trip

Rabbi Amy Eilberg offers a moving description of her experience of an multifaith road trip in *From Enemy to Friend: Jewish Wisdom and the Pursuit of Peace*. Eilberg experienced friendship, camaraderie, and mutual appreciation with Imam Yahya Hendi, Rabbi Gerry Serotta, and pastor Steve Martin as they traveled with the Caravan of Reconciliation to promote interreligious dialogue. They gathered clergy from Christianity, Judaism, and Islam, offering teachings from their respective traditions in support of active, respectful engagement with people of different religions. They also discussed the dangers of religious intolerance to American democracy. The clergy offered stories from their own experiences in interreligious engagement as well as prayers for peace.

Whether through sharing prayers, worship, meals, spiritual practices, service projects, teachings, or road trips, interreligious engagement is a great way to support American democracy. You don't have to travel thousands of miles like the Caravan of Reconciliation. You can start in your own community — making connections with other clergy, and then together visiting churches, synagogues, mosques, Buddhist centers, schools, universities, and community centers.

5

Observe a Three-Day Sabbath

In *Getting to the Heart of Interfaith*, the Interfaith Amigos (Protestant pastor Don Mackenzie, Rabbi Ted Falcon, and Sufi sheikh Jamal Rahman) describe a way for the three Abrahamic faiths to meet each other and deepen their dialogue. They celebrate a Three-Day Shabbat or Sabbath. Friday is the main gathering day for Muslims, Friday evening and Saturday is Shabbat for Jews, and Sunday is traditionally the day for communal worship for Christians. Meeting at each community's place of worship, they can witness or share in the rituals, then have a simple meal or snack, and talk together about the experience. "No one would be asked to 'water down' their tradition," the Interfaith Amigos write, "but each would celebrate the deepest yearnings of their own faith." This kind of engagement encourages respect, appreciation, empathy, open-mindedness, embrace of diversity, cooperation, searching for transcendence, and cultivation of wisdom — all democratic virtues.

6

Have a Service for the Nation

The First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution guarantees religious freedom. Remind people of this right by inviting the various faith communities in your area to plan and participate in a Service for the Nation. This might be held before an election or a national holiday such as the Fourth of July, Thanksgiving, or Presidents' Day. Include a mix of spiritual practices representative of different groups, such as a Buddhist vow, a Christian litany, a Jewish blessing, a Muslim prayer, a Hindu chant, etc. For ideas for planning and hosting such an event, as well as a collection of sample prayers, see the resource [Multifaith Prayer Service for the Nation at PracticingDemocracy.net](http://PracticingDemocracy.net).

7

Host a “Love Your Neighbors” Panel or Conference

It is one thing to stand for the Pledge of Allegiance and recite “liberty and justice for all.” It’s another to actively strive to ensure that the liberty and justice of everyone you encounter is protected. It is one thing to say that Americans hold common good as a core democratic value. It’s another to actively strive to ensure that the common good of all Americans is pursued. To that end, organize a panel or conference with speakers from various religions to share teachings about charity, responding to injustice, and loving our neighbors. Have each speaker give historical and more immediate examples. Use this panel discussion/conference to start an multifaith partnership if there isn’t one already in place in your community. Commit to working together on monthly service projects or justice-oriented projects in your area.

8

Share What’s Real

One of the many important freedoms of American democracy is the freedom of press. However, that freedom may be eroded by leaders denouncing media that is critical of them as being “fake” or biased. This trend can be especially troublesome when believers of a particular religion are singled out and denounced, often with erroneous information about their beliefs and practices. Pundits argue that denouncements by a governmental leader contribute to an erosion of public trust in fact-based journalism and encourage leaders to attack other pillars of democracy.

While you can fact check with sites like factcheck.org, snopes.com, politifact.com, and opensecrets.org, why not go a step further by publishing your own fact-filled interreligious newsletter for your area? Consider creating a comprehensive bulletin, calendar, and/or website that tells your community what actually happens — the projects, activities, and services — at your local places of worship. Then your community can easily access the truth of what your neighbors are doing, like the synagogue that prepares a meal for the local women’s shelter once a month, the mosque that operates a donation center on site, or the church that opens its doors to shelter undocumented immigrants and help them with legal and job assistance.

9

Practicing Unity

While the news continues to call our attention to political divisions, we are mindful of the spiritual teaching of “one hand, one heart” — that all our individual appearances are specific manifestations of the Whole Essence. This concept of Divine Oneness — of a prevailing unity behind the appearance of diversity — is a central theme in many mystical traditions. Regardless of our political stance, we can benefit from considering and focusing on our oneness — our commonalities — rather than on that which scares and divides us. Here are some spiritual practices to build awareness of our unity.

- Consider this quote from *Zen Flesh, Zen Bones* by Paul Reps and Nyogen Senzaki: “We all have the same colored bones.” Contemplate the wonder of the infinite varieties of what God has done with two eyes, two ears, a nose, and a mouth in your fellow humans; then contemplate all the ways we are the same.
- Use the phrase “just like me” to signify your unity with others. Whenever you find yourself assessing another person, whether you are saying something critical or something complimentary, right after you think or say it, add the statement “just like me.” For example, “That (person from a different religion) is so sure of himself, just like me.” “That (person from a different spiritual community) is very generous, just like me.”
- Consider this quote from *The Heart of the Enlightened* by Anthony de Mello, “The human mind makes foolish divisions in what love sees as one.” Pay special attention to those moments in your daily life when separations disappear.
- Try Jane Vennard’s suggestion for intercessory prayer in *Embracing the World*. When it is hard to articulate prayers for an enemy, do it nonverbally. Simply hold that person up to God’s love.
- Try the meditation that Ted Falcon recommends in *Religion Gone Astray*. Meditate on the Hebrew “Adonai Hu ha-Elohim” (1 Kings 18:39) or an English equivalent, “The One indwells in all.” Originally spoken by the children of Israel when the prophet Elijah demonstrated the power of their God, this verse is traditionally recited as a meditation and spoken at the moment of death. We are called to remember that everyone and everything that exists is an expression of the One Life we share.
- Take what Andrew Harvey, in *The Direct Path*, calls a “Unity Walk.” Through it you attempt to experience the innate “unity” of all experience. As you walk, consider and “know” everything you see, smell, touch, and feel as different aspects of the One you are one with in the core of your consciousness. The flower you love in the flower bed is the smile of the One; the wind brushing against your arm is the One moving against you; the faces of the people you pass in the street are all different masks of the One face that is also yours; every tiny sensation in your body belongs to the One living in and as you. It helps when you are doing this exercise to say the Sanskrit word for divine peace, *Shantih*, again and again in your heart center. As your experience of inner profound peace deepens, your unity with everything inside you and outside you can naturally shine out. At the end of your walk, extend peace and unity to all beings in the four directions, and dedicate any insights or joys you may have experienced to the happiness of all beings everywhere.

DEMOCRATIC VALUES, VIRTUES, AND SPIRITUAL PRACTICES

America’s democracy is founded on powerful ideas: We are all created equal. We have the right to life, freedom, and the opportunity to pursue our own happiness. At the same time, we are people in *united* states, trying to form a more perfect union and promote the welfare of all. American democracy can flourish only when citizens are united, at a deep level that transcends ideology, race, and class, with a shared spiritual and moral vision of what America should be.

Democracy is more than a form of government. It is a way of life that can be strengthened through spiritual practices — both those traditionally considered to be “inner work” and those that encourage active engagement with our neighbors and communities. The Practicing Democracy Guides give you specific ways to practice democracy at home, at work, on the Internet, and in other settings. The chart below is designed to show how the spiritual practices we’ve suggested, as well as others from your own experience, uphold democratic values and cultivate democratic virtues.

To uphold the democratic values of:				
Common good	Freedom Independence Liberty	<i>E Pluribus Unum,</i> “Out of many — one”	Equality Justice for all Rule of law	Patriotism Popular sovereignty
And to cultivate the democratic virtues of:				
Appreciation	Courage	Adaptability	Accountability	Assertiveness
Caring	Determination	Cooperation	Awareness	Consideration
Commitment	Honesty	Embracing diversity	Dignity	Cultivating wisdom
Creativity	Humility	Integrity	Fairness	Discernment
Empathy	Nobility	Mercy	Honor	Idealism
Generosity	Open- mindedness	Optimism	Initiative	Loyalty
Moderation	Purposefulness	Peacefulness	Love of learning	Responsibility, especially for civic engagement
Pursuit of excellence	Sacrifice	Searching for transcendence	Perseverance	Social conscience
Service	Self-discipline	Sincerity	Resilience	
Simplicity	Self-reliance		Respect	
Thankfulness	Trustworthiness		Steadfastness	
	Truthfulness		Strength	
We need spiritual practices of:				
Compassion	Joy	Connections	Forgiveness	Devotion
Gratitude	Openness	Love	Justice	Faith
Hope	Questing	Peace	Reverence	Listening
Hospitality	Transformation	Teachers	You	Meaning
Imagination	Yearning	Unity	Vision	Shadow
Kindness				

For more on American democratic values, virtues, and the language of democracy, visit PracticingDemocracy.net.



Additional Resources

For more resources related to the **Practicing Democracy Project**, visit:
spiritualityandpractice.com/projects/practicing-democracy-project/overview

To download additional **Practicing Democracy Guides**, visit:
spiritualityandpractice.com/practicing-democracy-project

For more on **conversations**, visit:
spiritualityandpractice.com/search/?q=conversations

For more on **diversity**, visit:
spiritualityandpractice.com/explorations/topics/view/35/diversity

For more on **peace**, visit:
spiritualityandpractice.com/practices/alphabet/view/25/peace

For more on **unity**, visit:
spiritualityandpractice.com/practices/alphabet/view/33/unity

For more on **Multifaith**, visit:
spiritualityandpractice.com/search/?q=Multifaith



A collaboration between Spirituality & Practice and the Fetzer Institute, The Practicing Democracy Project offers resources to strengthen and deepen the way we live out democracy. These spiritual practices help us do the work both in ourselves and in relationship with our neighbors and communities. Some practices enhance or support the essential civic virtues and qualities of American democracy, such as respect and service. Others help us deal with problems and obstacles that depress democracy, such as anger and rigid thinking.

The Project offers spiritual practices and resources for all of us — from advocacy and civic organizations to congregations and companies.

This Practicing Democracy Guide is copyright ©2020 by Spirituality & Practice ([SpiritualityandPractice.com](https://spiritualityandpractice.com)), a multifaith website presenting resources for spiritual journeys as part of the Practicing Democracy Project. The guide was researched and written by Habib Todd Boerger, Practicing Democracy Fellow and Mary Ann Brussat, Project Director.

For more information on the Project, visit PracticingDemocracy.net.

