

## Reflections on My Faith

*Editor's Note: This article is the second in a continuing series in which members of the YSU community share their personal faith experiences. The goal of the series is to be inclusive of as many faith traditions as are represented on the YSU campus. Contributors have been asked to communicate the importance of the religious practices in their lives, not to proselytize on the validity of any particular belief system. Submissions to the series are welcome. In this article, Randi Pappa provides an overview of her spiritual journey, including a discussion of her Buddhist practices.*

The day my parents brought my newborn sister home from the hospital, I became aware that I had an identity. I was me. I suddenly realized my Self as being separate from my family members. It was a new knowing, confusing and powerful. I was approaching four years old.

After I turned six, existential questioning arrived for me in the form of a child's delightful deep curiosity. While riding over the Y-bridge in Zanesville one day in 1959, for instance, I asked my mother, "Who am I? I mean, who is this Randi really? Why am I here?" That moment of my questioning remains exquisitely clear to me. My questions were not about ego, but about essential nature and purpose. At that time, my mother gave me some perfunctory answers that she hoped would satisfy me. Nevertheless, off and on for years, I would be beset by these and similar questions about the meaning of life, of *my* life, and of why I came into being and about my purpose, my origination, my source.

Of equally great importance was the meaning of death. What happened to us when we died? Faced with this inquiry, my grandmother told me about God and Jesus, and she decided that I needed some Sunday school training, a path indulged in the evangelical Protestant churches in and around my hometown. I went from one church to another through my twenties, searching for answers upon which I could thrive. My journey was often pleasant and rewarding. Christianity nurtured compassion and offered community, but the ancient questions alive in my heart begged further exploration, becoming a driving force that would lead me on to independent, often unstructured, study.

Always as the backdrop to my being stood the natural world, constant in its presence yet always changing in expression. My personal and quite private connection to it ran deep. My Divine, my Sacred, was nature itself—rivers, stones, grasshoppers, salamanders, and coyotes. Trees, clouds, and timothy grass. Deep blue sky, the tug of the moon, and the endless glitter of stars in the night sky. I learned that deep personal faith in the Divine is not immune to change, for my faith shifted and grew. And on occasion, it stagnated. Aside from peripheral references, my exposure to Protestantism failed to include the natural world, but this part of my journey deepened my compassion for all life. This compassion was the great teaching that I took with me when I left that tradition.

After several years of rattling around like a stone in an empty Coke can, good fortune and karma led me unexpectedly into the presence of Buddhist teachings and practices. I've been there ever since.

Just as there are various denominations of Protestantism in Christianity, there are many schools and lineages in Buddhism. I fully trust that the Nyingma school of Tibetan Buddhism was explicitly placed on my path because it was the tradition to which I would best relate, and I was ripe for it. Still, I had free will to decide whether to embrace Buddhism. I did. With the Buddhist teachings on morality and ethics as the springboard from my earlier spiritual training, I took a free fall into Vajrayana practices to move deeply into the human experience, to move beyond just enduring life and beyond personal suffering. This is accomplished not by denying emotions or becoming detached (as is often said of Buddhism) but by transforming emotions into holistic and balanced expressions of compassion and wisdom and by fostering a deep philosophical sense of equanimity for all beings, human and otherwise.

These three elements—compassion, wisdom, and equanimity—are qualities that are already present in each of us. Tibetan Buddhism has very specific trainings through meditation, visualization, and chanting that are designed to awaken those qualities and help one to manifest them in the world. I use these trainings as tools for working on various matters: judgmentalism, negativity, disconnection, fragmentation. To become whole. To deepen compassion. To establish clarity. To open to innate wisdom. These techniques are wonderfully adaptable for addressing all types of issues.

Although I have teachers respectfully called *rinpoches* (great and precious teachers) upon whom I rely for teachings and guidance, I am ultimately responsible for my path. Each *rinpoche* has a support community of practitioners, but I choose to go it alone. I attend retreats on the average of once a year to receive new teachings or refresh old ones—and to find inspiration. My development depends upon my dedication, which is tied to a personal desire for a relationship with the Divine, and I am responsible for choosing how deeply that connection is cultivated. The fiber of the Buddhist practices is shamanic and, therefore, engulfs my beloved natural world as part of the continual manifestation of the Divine. This is the meeting point of wick and flame, the place where I commune with the Sacred and cultivate my relationship to the Divine, and the shamanic quality is the deciding factor that fosters my connection to this tradition.

My *rinpoches* have shown me that to live without limits of the heart is the way of the Vajrayana practitioner. It is a path of the heart. I am the one who walks the path. And I am the path itself.

—Randi Pappa  
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## Taste of the Faiths to Be Served at St. Charles

The Taste of the Faiths Festival will be held on Monday, 25 April 2005, at St. Charles Borromeo Church on Route 224 in Boardman, Ohio. Hors d'oeuvres will be served beginning at 5:30 P.M., followed by dinner at 6 P.M. and musical entertainment. Tickets are \$15 and can be purchased at the door.

Organizers are expecting about two hundred attendees and welcome guests from all religions. "We are very proud to offer what has become a cultural event. Our largely Christian audience is curious about other cultures and welcomes the opportunity to explore [other cultures and faiths] in a hospitable environment," said Elsie L. Dursi, executive director of the Mahoning Valley Association of Churches (MVAC).

Starting as the Taste of the Churches in 1999, the festival brings together the faithful from many different religious institutions in the region who share their ethnic and specialty dishes for all the attendees to taste. "The opportunity to gather around food and actually discuss the traditions attached to food has been useful in breaking down barriers between people who live and work together but have little understanding of the faith of their neighbors," said Dursi. Past selections have included creamed chicken and biscuits, stuffed cabbage, Asiatic rice, Brier Hill pizza, clothespin cookies, and apricot kugel, among many others.

Attendees may bid during a silent auction on items and services donated by individuals and organizations in the Mahoning Valley. Items at past auctions have included artwork, gift baskets, handmade blankets, jewelry, and gift certificates for area restaurants and entertainment venues.

All proceeds from the event support the work of MVAC, which, according to Dursi, includes the publication of the newsletter *Imprint*, the organizing of the Mayors' Prayer Breakfast, and the sponsorship of the Church World Service Crop Walk, which raises money to feed the hungry and to provide developmental help to those in need.

Dursi said that MVAC attempts "to bring Christians together ecumenically and, at the same time, emphasize how all persons of faith are called to be good neighbors and work together."

More information about the Taste of the Faiths Festival can be obtained by calling MVAC at 330-744-8946.

—James J. Sacco

## Local Jewish Group Launches Magazine

In January 2005, the Youngstown Area Jewish Federation published the inaugural issue of the *Jewish Journal Monthly Magazine (JJMM)*. The periodical, which replaces the biweekly *Jewish Journal*, is intended to serve the Jewish population in Mahoning and Trumbull counties in Ohio and Mercer County in Pennsylvania. "We are continuing with the new magazine covering all areas that are of interest to the Jewish community with a new and updated look," said editor Sherry Weinblatt.

As part of its mission, the *JJMM* will report on local, national, and international news of Jewish interest and offer commentary and analysis of events. The publication will also serve as a medium of expression for views on issues that are of importance to the Jewish community.

Sponsored, in part, by a grant from the Schermer Trust, the *JJMM* is available, free of charge, at Kilcawley Center (second-floor lobby) and DeBartolo Hall (first-floor lobby) at YSU and at other area locations.

—James J. Sacco

## Book Review

Carroll, Kathleen M. *Keeping the Faith in Ohio: Words of Hope and Comfort from Our Spiritual Leaders*. Cincinnati, OH: Emmis Books, 2004. 172 pages. ISBN 1-57860-147-9. PB \$16.99.

As if anticipating the recent importance of the state of Ohio in an election year, this book seeks to agree with the assumption that issues of morality and faith are important to the people of this state. Yet, while most Ohioans agree that faith is important, very few are exposed to faiths/denominations other than their own. Even as we talk about the importance of faith, there has been a growing intolerance of faith alien to one's own. All too often, we see faith in the light of our limited understanding without taking time to expose ourselves to others' understanding. This book aims to

expose its readers to faith from a variety of religions and denominations in the form of sermons and articles delivered to different congregations and groups.

*Keeping the Faith in Ohio* can be used as a starting point to gain exposure to a variety of denominations within the Christian faith as well as some (limited) exposure to other religions. The sermons and inspirational writings nicely lend themselves to the purpose of a daily devotional. Most of the writings can be read in a short amount of time and are worthy of thought and reflection. Several of the contributors give a very different perspective than the outlook being espoused by the faith politics currently promoted, and they prompt us to question our responses to crisis as both individuals and as a nation. For example, Rev. James A. Diamond writes about a recent shift of focus in which we view crisis as a situation requiring revenge, not an infrequent view in the post-9/11 world, rather than as an opportunity for transformation. Similarly, in a sermon preaching prophetically, Rev. Allan Belton cites Walter Wink's "the myth of redemptive violence" (32) as a warning of the false teachings uttered in the name of Christianity, yet these teachings seem to be the true children of civil religion. The discussions presented in the text do not solely focus on the institution; Robert Durback reminds individuals of their spiritual growth as they move from "false certainties to true uncertainties" in their prayer lives (65).

While some of the voices speak in universal words and tones, others speak in religious dialects uniquely their own. Yet, almost all speak to the human conditions of love and acceptance, the need to be in relationships, and the inherent value of others. Sometimes this is expressed in age-old ways and other times in new and challenging outlooks. This book allows room for divergent experiences; for instance, "Here Comes the Judge" makes a connection between morality and religion while Rev. Sharon K. Dittmar quotes Jeffrey Rice's "recognition that I am able to lead a good, moral life without accepting religion" (56).

While Christian readings from various denominations are the majority, there is also representation of moral/ethical behavior and responses from Jewish and Unitarian (who include agnostics and atheists within their organization) points of view. Additionally, there is one reading from a Buddhist perspective. What is unfortunately missing is any other faith systems. In a book written about the faiths in Ohio, I found it odd that there were not (more) entries from the Buddhist point of view and that there was no representation from the Muslim community. Additionally, this book has no representative writings from the Sikh, Hindi, Baha'i, or Wiccan/pagan perspectives. These communities are present in the Mahoning Valley, so their absence from the book is conspicuous. While many of the readings are excellent, one cannot help but be struck by the sadly limited view expressed in a book whose purpose is to encompass all faiths and "establish common ground" (14). Rather, it is a taste, a starting point on which the reader, who might be searching for—and expecting—a more comprehensive overview of the religions in Ohio, will likely want to expand.

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